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ALLIGATOR IKE; or, The Secret of the Everglade.

A TALE OF THE OUTLAWS OF THE OKEECHOBEE.

BY CAPTAIN FRED. WHITTAKER,

AUTHOR OF "NEMO, KING OF THE TRAMPS," "RED RUDIGER," "THE RUSSIAN SPY," "THE RED RAJAH," "THE IRISH CAPTAIN," "THE MAN IN RED," "DEATH'S HEAD CUIRASSIERS," "PHANTOM KNIGHTS," ETC., ETC.



"WAAL, GREENY, WHAR'D YOU SPRING FROM?"

Alligator Ike;

OR,

The Secret of the Everglade.

A Tale of the Outlaws of Okeechobee.

BY CAPT. FRED WHITTAKER,
AUTHOR OF "THE FLYING DUTCHMAN OF 1880."

CHAPTER I. IN THE SWAMP.

ON the last day of December, at four o'clock in the afternoon, the thermometer stood at three degrees below zero in New York city, with a fierce gale howling over the bay from the northwest; the spray freezing on the bows of ships at anchor; the snow whirling in wreaths in the streets; beggars cowering in corners; policemen sneaking into bar-rooms by the side-doors; men hurrying home with their collars turned up to keep their ears from frost-bites; the wind seeming to pierce one's very marrow.

At the same hour, down in Florida, a young man had just burst out of the recesses of a cypress swamp into which he had rashly ventured, and stood wiping his face and fanning himself with his hat, completely overcome with the heat.

He wore a natty sporting suit which showed him to be from the North, and carried a very handsomely-finished double-barreled gun with fine mountings, slung round him with a baldric.

He was a good-looking young fellow enough, but he looked decidedly uneasy, for he had lost his friends and was all alone in a strange place.

He had left the steam yacht in which his party were ascending the St. John's river and had gone up a side stream in a little skiff, from which he had landed to pursue a rare heron that had flown into a cypress swamp. Now he had come out on the borders of another stream on which he had never been before, and realized that he was lost.

Yet the scene in which he stood was one in which a man might well be content to be lost.

All was as wild as when the Indians were the sole inhabitants of the land. The huge palmetto leaves swayed and glistened in the wind, cypress trees fringed the edge of the swamp he had just left, and the trailing vines hung from their lofty tops to the dense underbrush beneath. In many places the india-rubber vines had killed the trees and covered the lifeless trunks with a maze of green foliage, while every old live-oak was covered with creepers and air-plants, and the bright-green mistletoe flourished, fifty feet from the ground.

He stood at the borders of a deep black pool, smooth as glass, and so clear that it was not easy to tell where the scene above and the scene below met together. At either end of this pool it narrowed into a sluggish stream, and the vista stretched away deceptively, every thing looking alike all round, so that the young man muttered to himself:

"Confound it all, I do believe I'm lost. I wonder where the deuce I left the skiff?"

He had taken off his broad white hat, and was fanning himself with it, uneasy, but not as yet alarmed, when he was startled by a rustle in the underbrush, and saw that a large and particularly wicked looking alligator had crawled up the muddy bank, and was eying him in a peculiar manner.

Now, to Mr. Julian Grey, alligators had hitherto been objects of contempt. He had seen them shot from the decks of the big bustling river steamers; always scurrying off whenever human beings came in sight, and imagined they always did so, under all circumstances.

It was the first time he had been up one of the side streams of the St. John's, and he did not know the wildness of nature, away from the general presence of tourists.

Moreover, he had seen the alligators from the safe elevation of the steam yacht's deck, and they had never been in a position in which they could possibly climb up to him.

The present specimen was only a few feet distant, on the same bank with Julian, and was looking at him with its wicked little eyes in a manner that plainly indicated a confidence on the part of the reptile of making a meal of Grey, gun and all.

For the first time since he had been in Florida the young man felt afraid of an alligator, and hastily turned round and unslung his gun, without thinking that it only contained shot, and, being a choke-bore, could not be loaded with ball.

The alligator noted the movement, and the sunken eyes glared. The hideous creature raised itself on its crooked fore-legs, and its jaws opened and shut with a loud clack, while it seemed to be settling for a rush.

Julian Grey saw that it meant to attack him, and that it was very large.

How large he could not say, but to his excited imagination it seemed at least fifty feet in

length; and in a moment, with trembling fingers, he had unslung his gun, leveled at the head of the great reptile, and let drive both barrels together, or nearly so.

The next moment, through the smoke, he saw the long body darting toward him, heard a loud bellow of rage, and jumped behind a tree as the alligator shot past it, faster than a man could run.

He was congratulating himself on its having missed him when he saw the great head coming round toward him, the whole body bent like a bow, the tail waving to and fro in a singular manner, the alligator seeming to have great difficulty in turning to look his way.

The next moment the great tail gave a tremendous lash, coming against the root of the cypress in front of Julian's foot with a force that cracked the solid wood, causing the young man to jump like a harlequin out of the way of that terrible tail, with its sweep of destruction.

Then down came the reptile with another straight dart, and Julian Grey found himself jumping for his life again, and just managing to get round the tree in time.

Then too, just as before, the alligator, having missed its straight rush, gave another vicious slap of its tail at Julian, and this time the tail struck the butt of the young man's gun, and knocked it flying out of Julian's hand into the mud.

Too excited now to remember what he was doing, the young man turned and ran for his life into the dark swamp, to be stuck up to his knees in the black mud in another instant, and see the great reptile rushing for him in a way that showed the eagerness of famine.

Julian Grey struggled violently in the deep black ooze, but could not escape; and he drew from a fancy belt that encircled his waist a brand-new bowie-knife, whose bright, shining blade showed how seldom it had been used, with a vague idea of thrusting it into the monster's eye, when he heard the sharp crack of a rifle a little distance off, and the alligator dropped suddenly, sprawling out on the surface of the mud, quite still.

Julian looked round, but could see no one in the swamp, and addressed himself to the task of extricating his feet from the mud in which they were stuck fast.

But this proved a more difficult job than he had anticipated, for, as fast as he raised one foot, the other went in deeper, and he found that he was going in gradually, up to his waist, with the prospect of soon being quite swallowed up in the mire, when he heard a voice behind him, calling to him:

"Say, young feller, don't wrastle about so. I'll help ye in a minute if ye'll give me time. Hold on."

Julian tried to turn his head to see who was behind him, but could see no one. Presently he heard the sound of a hatchet cutting at something, and the voice called out once more to him:

"Here! ketch that, and pull out."

He saw that one of the long creepers hanging from a cypress that grew over his head, had been cut apart at the root, pulled clear of its tendrils for a long way up, and now dangled over the mud within a few feet of him.

"Ketch!" cried the voice. "Pull your level best, and get out afore that 'gator comes to life. He ain't dead yet."

It needed nothing more to make Julian Grey obey the order, and "pull his level best" as soon as he could get hold of the creeper.

By great exertions he managed to haul his body clear of the mud, and swing in to the bank on the creeper, when he saw a grim, bearded face peering at him between the creepers, round the bole of a huge live-oak, and heard the same voice say:

"Wait a bit now. That cuss ain't dead; but I ain't goin' to let him get to the water. Jest you stand out o' line of the critter, mister."

Mechanically Julian obeyed, and saw a long brown barrel thrust out from the covert of the creepers. Then came a flash and report. Looking round he saw the alligator leap up from the mud, floundering about violently for several seconds, when it lay still, and the voice cried:

"Hit's dead at last, cuss it."

CHAPTER II.

ALLIGATOR IKE.

JULIAN GREY looked in surprise at the figure that emerged from the bush at the last words.

A tall, broad-shouldered man, of gaunt and bony frame, with a mass of matted black hair and beard almost hiding his dark face, save for a pair of piercing eyes that looked out from the forest of locks under the shade of a broad palmetto hat. The dress of the stranger was as singular as his face, for he was entirely accoutered in leather of a peculiar kind that Julian recognized as alligator-skin, fastened into a loose, short coat, and boots that came nearly up to his waist. Under the coat the man wore a red flannel shirt and buckskin breeches, and he carried a long, old-fashioned, brown-barreled rifle, which he proceeded to reload, while he scanned Grey from head to foot in rather a scornful way, saying:

"Waal, greeny, whar'd you spring from? You look like's you jest cum outer yer mammy's bandbox and got lost, you do. Ho! ho!"

And he laughed in a singular, hollow, funereal way, without moving a muscle of his face, as he went on ramming down the bullet into his rifle, and Julian stood staring at him spellbound. Such a figure he'd never seen before, but he made shift to answer good-humoredly:

"You're quite right as to one thing. I'm lost as much as a man can be that hasn't the faintest idea of where he is. Possibly you can tell me?"

The stranger went on loading his rifle and returned the ramrod before speaking. Then he capped the piece and answered slowly:

"Reckin I kin. What's yer name?"

"My name? Well, it's Grey, though I don't know what that's got to do with putting me on my way," returned Julian, rather sharply.

The big stranger chuckled in the same way as before, without moving a muscle of his face.

"Ho! ho! don't see it, don't ye? Ye hain't b'en in Florriddy long, young feller. Whar'd ye come from when ye come here?"

Julian looked round him, puzzled.

"To tell the truth, I couldn't say just now. I'm all turned round. I came out this morning in a skiff from the steam yacht Lily and went up a little stream. Then I got out to follow a blue heron and lost my way in the swamp. How in the world am I to get back to the steamer?"

The stranger leaned his gun against the bole of a tree before he answered:

"Here, you jest lend me a hand while I git that riptyle in hyar."

Julian, in obedience to his gesture, extended his hand, and the stranger grasped it, took a long step into the mire of the swamp, caught hold of the alligator's tail, and slewed the body round to the firm bank at the foot of the cypress before he said another word.

Then he observed dryly, releasing Julian's hand:

"You're the greenest cuss I ever see'd. Don't ye know 'nuff to foller yer own track back whar ye kem from?"

Julian looked round him into the shadows of the gloomy cypress swamp. Usually he was very confident as to his abilities as a sportsman, being a good wing-shot and a member of three or four sporting clubs. But somehow he did not feel so confident now.

"I'm afraid," he answered, "I couldn't be sure. I wandered to and fro after that heron and quite lost my track. Which way lies the river?"

The hunter while he spoke had been hauling the alligator up along the surface of the black ooze by its tail and now had it over on its back on the bank. He drew a long butcher-knife from his belt, the blade thin from long sharpening, and observed as he tried the edge on his thumb:

"You're a-facin' the river now. Don't ye see which way the crick runs? They all runs into the river hereabouts."

Then he laid hold of one of the forelegs of the reptile, and made an incision in the soft skin that covers the lower part of the body, ripping the inside of the limbs and making a clean cut down the belly, with a skill that showed him to be an old hand at the trade of skinning alligators.

Julian watched him with some interest, and saw him begin at the tail to tear off the thick heavy mail of the creature, with an ease that astonished him. Positively the alligator's hide came off like the skin of an orange, with very little more trouble, and the singular hunter rolled it up into a bundle at the foot of the tree, and spoke to Julian in the old way.

"Well, what in blazes are ye starin' at? D'ye want to stay in the swamp all night, or git home? Which is it?"

"Why, get home, of course," returned Julian, not a little nettled at his tone. "I'm willing to pay you well if you'll guide me to the river where I can hail the steamer."

The hunter laughed again as he looked at him.

"Pay me well? I should say so. Whar's yer gun gone, greeny?"

Julian colored deeply. The alligator had struck it from his hand, and he had not seen where it went to in his hurry.

"I don't know," he answered. "The alligator sent it flying, and I don't know where it went."

The hunter pointed with his bloody knife toward a part of the swamp where Julian had not yet looked, and showed him his gun.

The weapon had come muzzle down into the soft black ooze, and was sticking up in the air; but to Grey's discomfiture, he saw that the stock was broken half off, and he knew that his beautiful Scott choke-bore was ruined, even while he went slowly and ruefully toward it and picked it up, hearing the hunter's contemptuous laugh:

"Ho! ho! what'll ye take fur her now? I'll give ye a fip, and durned if I'll do no more."

Grey picked up his broken gun and came back saying to the hunter:

"I say, what'll you take to put me on my

way to the river, and how much to place me aboard the Lily?"

The hunter threw back his hat to scratch his head, saying in answer:

"That accordin' to what you Yankees kin stand. Tell me you're all made o' money up thar, and don't think nothin' o' ten dollars. Reckon it's worth ten, ain't it?"

His glance was shrewd and furtive, as if he thought Julian would refuse the demand, but the young man only laughed and answered:

"It's worth anything in the world when a fellow is lost, my friend— Ah, what's your name?"

"My name's Ike Strang, mister; but owin' to makin' my livin' in the alligator biz, folks hez got ter callin' me Alligator Ike," responded the hunter, in the slow, drawling manner that seemed to be habitual to him. "Reckon ye might squeal now, if a feller said fifteen dollars, hey?"

Julian smiled at what he thought the ignorant extortion of a man unacquainted with the value of money, and answered evasively:

"Well, well, we'll see about it when we get to the Lily. If you don't drive a bargain with me I won't be stingy with you."

Alligator Ike eyed him from head to foot and then drew a long cord from one of the loose pockets of his alligator-hide coat and made up the skin of the defunct saurian into a bundle, which he swung over his shoulder.

Then he beckoned to Julian.

"Come along, sir. We'll see if you're a gent or not. Remember, if you hadn't found me you'd 'a' had to sleep in the swamp."

He strode off down the course of the stream, keeping on a little ridge of land that Julian soon perceived, ran parallel with the course of the stream.

At last he turned abruptly to the left and plunged through the deep mud till he came to the border of the stream where he drew from under a shelter of branches the end of a broad scow, in which lay four or five alligator-hides, evidently taken that day.

"Step in," said Alligator Ike, briefly, and the young man obeyed, when the hunter untied the rope by which the scow was fastened to a branch, picked up a long pushing-pole which lay across the craft, and sent it skimming out into the midst of the rivulet, when it began to float slowly down the current.

"Now," said Alligator Ike, sententiously, as he paused to rest on his push-pole, "you left your skiff down Scrag Neck Run; that's the next south of this, and if you want to get it I'll pole up thar."

"How do you know?" asked Julian, surprised. "Have you seen it?"

Alligator Ike grinned.

"Hev I see'd it? In course I see'd it. Yer didn't even take the trouble to tie up to a tree, and the durned skiff got adrift and floated down nigh to the river when I cum across it."

"And what did you do with it?"

"Shoved it in to the bank, in course, and let that crick alone. Any one could tell a green-horn had been up thar. Reckon you must have skeered more game than a starn-wheeler goin' up a river. Where's your steamer, mister?"

"She was about twenty miles below Enterprize, and was not expected to start to-day," said Julian; "but I wouldn't wonder to see her coming this way about sunset to look after me."

Alligator Ike chuckled and gave the scow a shove with his pole down the stream.

"Reckon they'd better, mister. You ain't the sort to take care of yerself in the Florridy swamps, and if ever you git to the Everglades you'll be sucked in sure. Hyar we are, a-comin' inter the river."

As he spoke, with a last shove he sent the scow out into the broader waters of the St. John's, and they heard the intermittent puffing of a small propeller close to them.

CHAPTER III.

ON THE RIVER.

"THAT'S the Lily," exclaimed Julian, animatedly, as soon as he heard the puffing of the little engine. "She's coming after me."

"She'd 'a' had a nice time findin' yer, ef I hadn't been thar when the 'gator went fur ye," said Alligator Ike, sardonically. "Now then, mister, I'll trouble ye fur that fifteen dollars."

"What fifteen dollars?" asked Julian.

Alligator Ike made no answer save to shove the boat back into the mouth of the little stream from which they had just emerged, and bring it up against a bank of black mud, when he said in the gruffest manner:

"Git ashore thar, darn yer skin! Git ashore! I said we'd see if you was a gentleman, and ye're nothin' but a durned Yankee slouch. Git ashore!"

He looked so threatening that Julian hastily jumped up, crying:

"What's the matter? Good heavens, Ike, don't be so hasty. I'll pay you anything you ask me in reason. I owe you my life."

Alligator Ike held out his horny hand.

"A bargain's a bargain. I don't want nothin' for yer life. Tain't worth shucks. Ye axed

me what I'd take to put ye on board the Lily. I say fifteen dollars. Shell out, or git ashore."

Thus urged, Julian went into his trowers pocket, produced a well stuffed pocket-book, and handed over to the boatman a new twenty-dollar bill, which Ike instantly handed back.

"No," said the big man, sternly. "I didn't say twenty; I said *fifteen*, Yank. Gimme a ten and a five, and I don't ax nothin' more, nor I won't take no more, neither, nor no less."

Julian replaced the bill, and gave Ike the sum for which he asked, which the hunter stuck into his belt pouch, after which he shoved the scow out into the stream, with the remark:

"That ere puffer's comin' clost, Yank. Hyar we go, 'cordin' to 'greement."

The vigorous push of the pole sent the scow skimming away out of the little stream, back into the broader current of the St. John's, here several hundred feet wide, bordered with the luxuriant green foliage of the cedar swamps and palm woods.

The river was so crooked that less than half a mile of its course could be seen, and it looked like a lake in the tropics.

Palms, palmettos, live-oaks and cedars, all festooned with the ghostly gray Spanish moss, came down to the water's edge, rising out of a dense bed of underbrush, matted with creepers and gay with flowers.

The last rays of the setting sun cast a crimson glow over the panorama, disclosing great flocks of water-fowl rising from the water, in the midst of which advanced a little white steam yacht, puffing her way over the dark bosom of the river.

As soon as the scow came in sight, the little steamer altered her course and came bearing down upon it, while Alligator Ike arrested his way by means of the long push-pole and stood like a statue on the end of the craft, the stern, with Julian Grey sitting in it, close to the bushes on the shore.

Presently the steam yacht passed them, and Alligator Ike had a good view of her.

She was some forty-eight feet long, with a slender white hull and a very handsomely finished deck-house, with a broad veranda round it, and an upper deck with a low rail. On the top of the sharp cutwater were carved two large green leaves, out of which rose a lily in white, matching the name, which was printed in gold on each side of the prow.

The engine seemed to be below, contrary to the usual custom in these small craft, and was a model of compactness, leaving the maximum of room for the crew and passengers of the Lily, who seemed to be pretty numerous for so small a vessel.

As she passed by the scow, there were three men, in a blue, half-naval uniform on the bow, while the roof of the deck-house held four or five people, and others were visible inside.

As the Lily came abreast of the two men from the swamp, Julian Grey stood up and hailed, in ultra nautical fashion:

"Lily, ahoy! Where are you going to? Don't you see me?"

"Stop her!" cried a voice from the upper deck. "Back water, Captain Jim. It's Mr. Julian."

The screw churned the water rapidly, reversing its usual action, and the Lily stopped alongside of the scow, when Alligator Ike, with a dig of his long pole into the soft mud of the bottom and a heave of his powerful body, whirled the light craft round so that Julian could lay his hand on the railing round the yacht.

Then Alligator Ike said shortly:

"Git aboard, young feller."

Julian retained his hold of the railing.

"Not so," he said, feelingly. "You saved my life to-day, and I cannot be so ungrateful as to let you depart without as much as asking you to have some dinner with us. Besides, I imagine you are just the man we have been looking for in these parts. We want a guide, well acquainted with the country; who can take us to the Everglades this winter. You'd better come aboard. It will pay you to come, Mr. Strang."

Alligator Ike shook his head sullenly.

"I don't want no place as guide, and I don't want to beg no dinner from no man, while the woods is full of game. Git aboard and drop the talk, Yank."

Julian still hesitated.

"At least," he said, "do me another favor, and I'll pay you for it. You say you know where my skiff is. Fetch it in, and I'll give you a five-dollar bill."

Ike cast a glance up at the roof of the deck-house, where he saw several persons leaning over to listen, and then he pulled down his hat over his eyes and growled:

"Git aboard then. I'll fetch in yer skiff to ye. Whar'll ye tie up?"

"Right over by the blasted pine yonder," said a voice from the deck-house. "We'll wait for you, my man."

Ike looked up again and a sneer curled his black beard as he retorted:

"Will ye, my man? That's darned kind of yer, my man. But I don't want ter be waited for, my man. I go to the dickens, my man."

Hyar, young feller, git aboard and be quick. I'll fotch yer darned old skiff in. Git aboard, I say."

He spoke so savagely that Julian swung himself on board, when the surly scout sent his scow skimming away up the stream beside the bushes and disappeared, and Julian Grey climbed the side-ladder to the deck above, to be greeted with:

"Why, Julian, where have you been?"

The people on the deck were four in number, Julian's father, mother, and sister, and a young lady friend of his sister, Miss Zuniga.

Colonel Grey was a stately-looking person with heavy gray mustache, and the peculiar air of an old soldier, though he had not touched any weapons more formidable than a shot-gun for many years. He was a rich man, as any one could see from his style of traveling, and hailed from the State of Massachusetts. Mrs. Grey had snow-white hair and a young face, which was reflected in that of her daughter Alice, a pale blonde, whose contrast and foil sat beside her in a dark girl with large black eyes, whose dress showed her to be rich and an adept in the arts of the toilet.

"Where did you pick up that savage, Julian?" his father asked curiously. "He seems to be very touchy about being called 'my man!' Is he a hunter?"

"An alligator-hunter, sir. I met him out in the swamp, and if he had not come in the nick of time, I should have been digested in the stomach of one of those gentry there."

He pointed down to the river where the long black snouts of the alligators were poking about as usual, and Alice screamed:

"Oh, Julian! have you been in danger?"

"Well, yes. I fired small shot into the face of one of the creatures, and it came for me in a way that was decidedly affectionate. Look at my gun. That was his tail did that."

He exhibited the broken stock, and the girls looked at it in wonder and dismay.

Inez Zuniga, the brunette friend of Alice Grey, shuddered when she saw it, and said in a low voice:

"Oh, Mr. Julian, how providential! And you're sure you're not hurt?"

"Not at all; though if it had not been for Ike Strang, I should have been killed," he answered.

Then he told them the story of his escape, and when he had finished, Colonel Grey remarked:

"Well, we can excuse a little gruffness of speech and manner from this hunter if his actions are all like that. He's just the man we want for a guide, I think."

"I was trying to persuade him to come with us," answered Julian, "but he is so gruff and so very disagreeable that I think we cannot prevail upon him. He called me 'Yank,' every time he didn't say 'young feller.'"

"Did he?" asked Grey quickly.

"Yes. It seems to be a term of dislike with him, for he scowls whenever he says it."

Colonel Grey seemed to be struck with the word, and went thoughtfully to the stern of the little vessel to watch for the coming of Alligator Ike, while the little yacht drifted down the stream.

Pretty soon the scow reappeared from the bushes, towing a small skiff.

CHAPTER IV.

A RECOGNITION.

WHEN the alligator-hunter came in sight he was standing in the middle of his broad scow, his powerful frame fully revealed against the crimson flush in the west, the push-pole in his hand, where he had just withdrawn it from the mud, his broad hat thrown on the back of his head, showing his countenance.

Colonel Grey lifted a field glass and scanned his face closely as he advanced, and then beckoned to Julian before Alligator Ike came alongside.

"Julian," he said in a low voice, "how did that man talk in the swamp before he came here? Did he use good grammar or not?"

Julian reflected:

"Pretty bad, sir, I should say. Talked about the same as the other people down here."

The colonel nodded thoughtfully.

"Indeed? You're sure of that?"

"I think so, sir. Why do you ask?"

"Never mind," answered his father, hastily. "He looks like some one I once knew. I'll go down myself and see him."

The colonel climbed down the side-ladder and stood in the stern of the Lily as the alligator-hunter came up, watching him keenly. He seemed to be much interested in him for some reason.

Alligator Ike, on the other hand, as his boat came drifting down the stream, turned his back on the Lily, and seemed to concentrate all his attention on his push-pole.

Furthermore, as he came nearer, he drew his broad hat down over his forehead, so that when he at last came alongside, the colonel could only see his black beard under the edge of the hat.

Not to be baffled, the Northern gentleman said in his politest way:

"I'm under many obligations to you, my dear sir, for having saved my boy's life to-day, and for your kindness now in bringing in his skiff. Won't you come on board and at least try my whisky?"

Alligator Ike made no reply but to lay down his push-pole and fasten the painter of the skiff to the stern railing of the Lily.

When this was done, he straightened up and shouted up toward the upper deck:

"Hello, Yank! Whar be ye? Whar's that five dollars ye promised? Hyar's the skiff."

"Here! In a minute!" cried Julian, and he came scrambling down to the side of the boat.

Alligator Ike stood up in the middle of his scow and rested his push-pole against the bottom to retain his position, half turning his back on the Lily, in a manner so openly rude and insulting that Colonel Grey flushed slightly as he said:

"My good sir, I spoke to you just now. Is it the habit of Southern gentlemen to repel politeness with insult?"

Alligator Ike wheeled around where he stood and fixed his dark piercing eyes on Grey.

"Southern gentlemen!" he echoed in a singular tone, and entirely dropping his rough accent. "There are none left, man. You Yankee mudsills have driven them out, and devour the land that once was theirs. We have no gentlemen. I'm a cracker. Don't you see me take Yankee money?"

Then turning on Julian fiercely:

"Give me my pay and let me go. D'ye think I want to lie here all night by your blistering sore of a Yankee boat. Give me my money, curse you and your whole crew!"

Julian hastily handed over the stipulated sum, and Alligator Ike stuck it into his pouch, when Colonel Grey cried out excitedly:

"I know I've seen you before, or some one very like you. I tell you, you *must* come aboard this boat. I want to engage you as a guide. See here, don't go. You seem to be fond of money. I want to engage a guide and I'll pay you fifty dollars a month if you'll guide us."

Alligator Ike shrugged his shoulders, keeping his back resolutely turned to the steamer, and answered indifferently, resuming his "cracker" drawl and dialect:

"Tain't 'nuff, Yank. Hev to double it afore we kin talk biz."

"Very well, I'll double it," said the colonel, in a resolute tone. "I'll give you a hundred dollars a month to be our guide. Now will you come aboard here or not?"

Alligator Ike turned round at last and faced Colonel Grey fully, throwing back his broad hat to show his face.

"I'll come aboard, Yank," he said, slowly, "but mebbe the time'll come when ye'll wish I hadn't come."

The colonel laughed and held out his hand. "My dear sir," he said, "I'll risk it. You can be as ill-tempered in speech as you like; but as long as your heart's in the right place and you act as you did to-day, you and I will never quarrel, I can assure you."

Alligator Ike took the proffered hand and said in the same slow way:

"Mebbe ye wouldn't give your hand to me, Yank, ef ye knowed how many of your kind I'd throw'd in their tracks."

Colonel Grey looked at him fixedly, and spied on the powerful figure of the hunter something that attracted his attention.

His belt of alligator-skin, instead of being fastened with a buckle and strap, had a small military plate and hook in front, which bore the letters "C. S. A." surrounded by a wreath.

The colonel smiled as he saw it, and again held out his hand, saying:

"Is that all, my friend? That's nothing. I'm always glad to see one of the men who fought against us, for they were men in the true sense of the word. Look here."

As he spoke he threw back his coat and showed on the front of his vest, over the heart, a little bronze star, hung by a piece of ribbon.

"Do you know that?" he asked.

Alligator Ike's face darkened slightly as he looked at the well-known badge.

"It didn't need that to tell me who ye were, Yank," he said, slowly. "I've seen ye afore."

"Indeed!" said Grey, eagerly. "I thought I knew your face, too. What regiment did you belong to?"

The hunter threw up his head proudly, and seemed about to answer, when another feeling checked him from the utterance.

"No, no," he said, gloomily; "never mind now. 'Tis all over, many a year ago, Yank. Let her rest. You have a history; you can look at the flag that once waved in the color company, as it hangs on the wall in its tatters, and you can feel the prouder for it. Ours is hidden away in garrets for the moths to devour, and we have to wipe our eyes after a good look at the poor old rags. Never mind where I was or what the regiment."

"Well, well," said Grey, kindly, "I don't mean to recall painful feelings, my dear sir. You must come in and have supper with us."

It had not escaped his notice or Julian's that when the giant hunter was agitated he dropped

his cracker drawl, and spoke like an educated gentleman.

"Come in and sup with us," he pursued. "The sun has set and it grows dark. Tie up your scow, and we'll fasten to the bank."

Alligator Ike nodded absently and stepped on board the yacht, where he stood leaning against the stern railing, while the little vessel steamed slowly up the stream to the only bare place in sight on the bank, and tied up to a palm tree for the night.

The hunter remained where he had first stopped, motionless as a statue, appearing to be absorbed in thought, till the Lily had been tied up, when he looked at the upper deck in time to catch the intent gaze of three ladies, two of them young and pretty, who instantly drew back their heads, as if abashed at being found out in peeping.

Alligator Ike's lip curled as he muttered to himself inaudibly:

"Fool! did ye think your time was come again? What have you to do with women now?"

He turned away, threw his old-fashioned brown rifle over his arm, and went forward to the bow of the boat, where he found pilot, engineer and fireman, making things snug for the night, Colonel Grey superintending.

"See here, Yank," he said, abruptly, "'twon't do. I take it all back. I can't stay hyar. I should smother. I'm gwine back to the woods."

Grey laid his hand on his arm.

"My dear sir, you've passed your word to stay with me and I shall hold you to it. Your fellow-soldiers have never broken it. They gave their parole and—"

"Hold on," interrupted Alligator Ike, fiercely. "Don't ye make no mistake, Yank. I never give no parole to no man."

"You gave it to me," said Colonel Grey firmly; "and you can't escape. You promised to be my guide for a hundred dollars a month, and I shall hold you to the promise."

Alligator Ike looked at him gloomily.

"Ye *will* have it then," he muttered. "I told ye ye'll be sorry for it; so ye will. But don't say I hain't warned ye. What's that for?"

A bell was ringing in the cabin.

"That is for supper," said the colonel heartily.

"Come in, sir, and remember that I trust to the honor of a Southern gentleman to make me never repent my confidence. Come in."

Alligator Ike hesitated a moment, then bowed his head and followed his host into the handsome cabin of the yacht where Grey said:

"My wife, my daughter Alice, and Miss Zuniga, Mr. Strang. Julian you know already. Come, let us sit down at once."

CHAPTER V.

A RUDE GUEST.

THE cabin of the Lily was furnished with a comfort and luxury that showed her owner to be a rich man who knew how to enjoy life wherever he went.

It occupied two-thirds of the boat, was divided into state rooms by temporary folding partitions that could be taken down in the day time, so as to throw the whole area into a single large saloon; and such was its condition that evening, while the center was occupied by a dining-table covered with a snowy cloth and glittering with silver and cut glass.

Into this cabin, fitted up in expensive hard woods, entered the Grey family, handsome in dress and appearance, with luxury and refinement visible in every feature, and with them, as an equal, stalked in the alligator-hunter, in his hard leathern jacket and boots, his coarse red shirt—a striking contrast.

Yet somehow it seemed, even to the women of the Grey family, that the big man didn't look so much out of place as might have been expected, rough as was his attire.

He removed his hat with a slight, rather cold bow, to the ladies of the party, and entered the splendid cabin with the same ease and simplicity as if it had been a hut in the midst of the forest.

He appeared not in the least abashed, but only inclined to be cold and distant in his manner, as if he were a savage prince into whose land they had come unasked, but toward whom his dignity compelled him to be civil.

Mrs. Grey, a simple, kind-hearted woman, was not a little afraid of the gloomy, bearded giant, while the two girls eyed him with fear and admiration combined; for Alligator Ike was a very fine figure of a man, and his face was exceedingly handsome when his broad hat was removed.

"Mr. Strang," said the colonel, waving him to a seat, "you will be kind enough to sit between my daughter and Miss Zuniga. The young ladies will, I hope, attend to your wants."

Alligator Ike bowed slightly and answered in his deep voice and most pronounced dialect:

"The young ladies is very good, but in the South we men don't let ladies wait on us. We wait on them, sir."

The colonel smiled.

"We won't dispute over that. Here comes dinner. Soup, Mr. Strang?"

"Thank ye, no, sir," returned Ike coldly. "I

never teches the stuff. It's p'izen to us wood-men."

The colonel colored slightly at the remark; but helped the rest of the party, while Alligator Ike sat bolt upright in silence at the table not moving a muscle, but staring at a cut glass bottle, while the other people ate their soup rather awkwardly.

Colonel Grey began to feel that he had made a mistake, for a silence had fallen on the party which it seemed impossible to break, and the face of the hunter looked particularly stern and forbidding.

Presently the fish came on, fresh from the river; and Colonel Grey, without asking any questions, sent a plate of delicious black bass to the hunter in common with the rest.

Still more to the host's discomfort, Ike said to the black waiter, in gruff tones:

"You kin take it away, boy. I don't ever eat no fish, 'less I ketches it myself."

Alice Grey, the only one who did not seem to be afraid of the giant, and who was a spoiled beauty, used to having her own way, here tittered audibly and looked up into Ike's stern eyes, saying:

"Mr. Strang, may I ask you a question?"

The alligator-hunter nodded slightly.

"You may, miss."

"Why don't you eat fish of any one else's catching, and what is the use of sitting down to dinner unless one does eat?"

Ike shrugged his broad shoulders.

"I ain't good at conundrums, miss."

"One would think you were like the lady in a the Arabian Nights story who ate rice with a bodkin," retorted Alice, saucily. "I don't think you're a bit nice to behave like that."

Alligator Ike compressed his lips and cast a glance out of the window over the river, but made no answer, and another silence fell on the party till the waiter made his appearance with a third course, which proved to be a dish of wild ducks, when Grey said quietly:

"Now, Mr. Strang, I hope we've something to tempt you at last. Surely you eat roast duck?"

Ike shook his head.

"Thank ye sir," he said in the coolest way in world. "I never eat ducks."

"Then what in the world will you have?" cried Julian Grey suddenly. "We've tried you with everything under the sun. What will you have?"

Alligator Ike looked at him indifferently.

"Nothing that you Yanks kin give me. I told yer father not to keep me; but he 'lowed as how he'd make me come to dinner, and here I am. Now let's see him make me eat."

The colonel colored high at this openly rude speech, and replied with as much courtesy as he could retain under the circumstances:

"I am sorry you put it in that light. In the North we consider a man is bound to be civil to the guests at his own table, and to the host at whose table he sits, one as much as the other. I am sorry if you have determined not to eat at my table at all."

Alligator Ike looked at him in a singular way, and a smile of dubious import curled his black beard as he answered slowly:

"Yank, I told ye me and you couldn't cotton together, but since a bargain's a bargain, and I said I'd be yer guide, I'll be it. But guides don't come to dinner in the cabin, nor they don't eat with the ladies of the family. Ye made a mistake, and that's all there is 'bout it. Reckon we'll be more comfortable if I go ashore and cook my own grub my own way. We-uns and you-uns ain't made to be together. Reckon I'll say good-evenin'."

As he spoke he rose up in his six feet and several inches more of bone and brawn, and bowed to the ladies.

"Ladies," said this singular alligator-hunter, with a grace in his bearing and face that was in singular contrast with his uncouth dialect, "I've b'en brought in here ag'in' my will, and I've had to do and say things I hadn't order do and say. You-uns is from the North, we-uns is from the South, and some on us is jest as hot rebs as we was twenty year ago, when we was pottin' Yanks. But I hain't nothin' to say or do ag'in' you ladies. Good-evenin'."

And with that he bowed low, stepped across the saloon where he had laid his rifle and hat, took up both and stalked out.

At the door he paused to say:

"Cunnel Grey, when you want to talk guide, arter supper, I'm with yer. Tell one of the boys to toot a whistle three times, and I'll come. My dinner's in the wood."

Then he vanished, and Grey said, pettishly:

"Serves me right for trying to patch up a peace with those imbibed savages. We'll have no peace till the generation's dead. Come, children, eat your dinner. I won't let it spoil mine."

And indeed an incubus seemed to be lifted from the party after the exit of the hunter, for they all began to eat and talk and discuss him at the same time with some resultant confusion.

"I think he's a very handsome fellow," observed Alice Grey, "but it's evident that he hates us as if we were his mortal foes."

"He makes me shudder when I look at him,"

said Inez Zuniga. "I think he wants to murder us all."

"He looks like a man who has suffered some very great wrong," said Mrs. Grey, thoughtfully. "I don't know what it reminded you of, Mark, but to me it seemed as if he had known you at some time."

"He did," returned the colonel, gravely, "and had it not been for that, I might never have asked him aboard. Now, I've about made up my mind that his mystery is not worth penetrating in face of his rudeness."

"Why not, dear?" asked his wife, softly.

The colonel compressed his lips, and looked angry. It was evident that the hunter's rude manner had irritated him excessively.

"Never mind, Mary," he said. "I've my reasons for it. There's such a thing as being too set in one's ways. I've tried to treat him as a friend, for he once was a gentleman; but since he insists on being treated as a common guide, I'll not balk him."

The dinner proceeded rather gloomily for some time after that, but when it was over, and the little party had gathered in the after part of the cabin, where the colonel and Julian were smoking, and darkness had settled over all outside, Alice crept near to her father and said, coaxingly:

"Come, tell us the story."

"What story?" asked Grey.

"The story of this guide," said Alice. "Come, father, I know there's a story somewhere, and it's a pretty one. You never will tell us about the old war times without a great deal of coaxing, but I'm sure there's one hidden here. Do tell us, please. Who is this Mr. Strang?"

"Ah, please do, Mr. Grey," added Inez Zuniga, coaxingly. "I do love to hear these war stories; but you old soldiers seem to be so unwilling to speak about the old times. Tell us where you met this Mr. Strang, and what makes him so bitter and disagreeable."

Colonel Grey sighed slightly.

"It's a sad story, girls. Ask your mother, Alice. I think she knows the whole of it."

Mrs. Grey shook her head and said, in an agitated way:

"Don't ask me, Mark. Don't ask me. Tell them what you know. I know nothing about it. He looked like the man I once knew, in the upper part of the face, but he's changed greatly, if he be the same. I cannot be certain. Tell them all."

Thus urged, the colonel began his story in the gloom of the cabin, with the rays of the moon gleaming in at the windows through the river mist.

CHAPTER VI.

THE COLONEL'S STORY.

"WHEN first I knew the man who now calls himself Isaac Strang," said the colonel, "he was a rich planter, but still richer from owning large tracts of timber, not far from Fernandina. Strang's not his name, but I can't tell you his real name."

"It was before the war, when I was a young man, Alice, engaged in the lumber trade between New York, Fernandina and Jacksonville. He was one of my principal customers and I sold large quantities of yellow pine for him on commission in the North."

"He owned cotton lands in Georgia, timber lands in both Georgia and Florida and was said to be connected in some way with the Seminole Indians, who remained in the Everglades after the transportation of their tribe to the Indian Territory."

"In those days he was a rich young man, generous to a fault, a high liver and very fond of traveling. Contrary to the custom of many Southerners, he was fond of Northern men, and was always particularly kind to me. When a comparative boy, he had been to the Military Academy at West Point, and had graduated therefrom with honor, but had resigned within a very short time after his entry into the service, not liking the restraints of discipline. He was so rich that he could afford to do as he pleased, and hated to obey any orders but his own."

"Then came the war, and my business was destroyed, as you may suppose. I went into the service and tried to do my duty, while I heard that my friend had entered the Confederate army and had been made a commander in their cavalry."

"The war went on, as you all know, and at last came to a close with the collapse of all that he and his friends held dear, when Lee surrendered at Appomattox."

"I was present at that surrender with my regiment, and we were ordered out that night, after the main body of the army had been paroled, to march South on secret orders. An officer from the war department was sent along with us, and my regiment had the advance, for, as you know, I was in the cavalry of our army."

"We marched all night, and when morning arrived all the men were dog tired, as happens after such long marches. As I looked back over the column many of them were bareheaded, from having fallen asleep in their saddles dur-

ing the night, having lost their hats and ridden on, unconscious of the deprivation."

"When it grew light, I found myself close to the staff officer sent with us, and asked him whether he could tell why we were going so fast, when the war was practically over."

"Then it was that he told me what I had not heard before, that the cavalry of Lee's army had broken away, the night before the surrender, and were marching across the country as fast as they could go, to reach the army of General Johnston, which had not yet surrendered."

"To make a long story short, we marched our men till our horses broke down, pressed more from the country round, and traversed the whole State of North Carolina in pursuit of that daring band, till we found it had broken up at the news of Johnston's surrender, and that the men had dispersed to their homes and were coming in to our provost, marshals in all directions, to give their individual paroles."

"Still we heard that one body had remained intact, and had entered the State of South Carolina, calling themselves the Invincibles and boasting they would never give their paroles or surrender to any man."

"It was this force which I was detailed to follow across South Carolina and Georgia, pressing horses wherever I went, and finding to my surprise that they had left nothing but broken-down animals on the road and seemed to keep ahead of me with perfect ease."

"At last I heard that other forces were on the way to intercept them from Savannah, that the telegraph had roused the country against them, and that they had begun to fight on their way to the Far South."

"But whatever force they met they always seemed to be victorious, for a very simple reason. The country was full of our troops, but they were scattered in small detachments, and the 'Invincibles' seemed to be strong enough to beat these detachments one after the other."

Here Grey stopped a moment and Alice asked eagerly:

"And did you catch the poor fellows?"

"Poor fellows? Why poor fellows?"

"Oh, I can't help pitying them. All alone and with their friends conquered, and you going after them to kill them. I hope they got off."

Julian interrupted her rather sharply.

"Are you not ashamed to talk that way? They were the enemy and they deserved it."

Colonel Grey put up his hand soothingly.

"There, there, don't quarrel over it. Twenty years ago is a long time. Julian was a baby and Alice not born then. Well, I did catch them at last. I ran into them in the Georgia pine barrens, when I had about three hundred men left, out of three regiments with which I had started, and found that they were about twice as strong as my own force."

"And what happened then?" asked Julian, eagerly. "Oh, how I wish I had lived then, father! There are no wars now, and it's so stupid."

The colonel sighed slightly.

"You may be thankful for it, Julian. War's a bad business; civil war worst of all. That day I had to face Strang, and knew in him my old friend, who had done me more than one kindness before the war."

"And there we were, met for the first time in four years, and it was my business to kill him or take him prisoner, his to do the same by me."

"You may be sure I did my duty. I got together my men on their jaded horses, and the fight began. In twenty minutes after the battle opened my force was surrounded; my men falling rapidly, and though we did our best, in twenty minutes more I had to sound the retreat, and found that even the resource of flight was cut off."

"And what did you do then?" asked Julian.

"I charged, with less than fifty unwounded men, was received with a furious fire, and had my horse shot under me, while my men cut their way out individually or were shot down before me, till I was left alone, with the gray-coats closing in on me."

Alice shuddered.

"Oh, you poor papa. I'm so glad it's all over."

"But how did you get out?" asked Julian.

"I did not get out," returned Grey, calmly. "I was surrounded and they began to fire at me, just as they did at the rest. I thought they were determined to exterminate us all, and I backed up to a tree and began to fire my revolvers, in the hope of selling my life as dearly as I could; when I saw an officer come galloping down, and heard him shout to his men not to fire."

"Then he dashed up to me and I recognized my old friend, much changed from the gay fellow he used to be, all covered with dust, looking gray all over."

"But I saw he knew me and he called to a bugler and told him to sound the recall, not noticing me, save by a look."

"Then his men came straggling in and a very fine set of fellows they were. I no longer wondered they had beaten so many of our soldiers. They were picked men, splendidly armed, and

mounted on the thoroughbred horses which they had taken from every plantation on the road."

"They formed up within fifty yards of me and gave a regular Southern yell in honor of their victory. Then I heard my friend give the order to march and they went off, while their leader came back alone to me, got off his horse and threw the bridle over the branch of a tree before he spoke."

"Then he asked me whether I thought there was any fight left in the Confederacy yet, and whether they were all whipped or not?"

"I told him he was the best judge of that. He had certainly whipped my force; but if he expected to keep up the war single-handed, he would find himself outmatched, for men were concentrating from all quarters to hunt him down. He laughed in a fierce, scornful way, and told me that I was mistaken, and so was every one who thought like me. He had never surrendered, and never intended to surrender. He gave me, then and there, a message to the general commanding the department, to say that Colonel —, I won't say whom — of the Florida cavalry, defied him, and intended to keep the Confederate flag flying as long as he had a man to follow him. And after that man was gone, he added, that he himself would carry on the war all alone, as long as he pleased."

"Then he left me, and disappeared with his column, and I never heard of or saw him after that day till to-day."

"But he didn't keep his word," said Julian, "or we should have heard of him."

"I fancy he was disappointed," returned the colonel, "in his calculations. At the time I met him, the forces in Texas had not surrendered, and as a matter of fact, they never did surrender, except on paper, but scattered to their homes unparoled. It is my opinion that he expected to join the Texans, and finding himself disappointed, gave up the game, and retired to these swamps to lead the life of a hermit, as he does now."

"But why doesn't he go back to his lands?" asked Julian. "Surely they have not vanished."

"As good as vanished. By refusing to take his parole, he made himself an outlaw, and the negroes have settled all over his old plantation. I suppose he thinks if he came back he would be arrested. How little he knows! He's made his bed and must lie on it, I suppose. But that can't be helped. If my money can aid him to a little comfort, I shall be glad of it."

CHAPTER VII.

THE OUTLAWED GUIDE.

COLONEL GREY and Julian went on deck after the colonel's short story, and looked over into the now darkened forest.

On that bank of the river the ground was no longer swampy; and a dense forest, nearly bare of underbrush, stretched out from the bank as far as could be seen.

Some distance off, under the dark arches of the woods, they saw the red glow of a fire, and the colonel said:

"Yonder's Strang. I think I'll go and see him. He may be calmer now, and is not likely to be so rude."

"Let me go with you," said Julian. "He saved my life to-day, and I can't help thinking there is much good in the man."

"Good in him? Of course there is. Never was a finer fellow before the war. He can't have changed so much since," said the colonel. "Come and let us go."

They crossed the gang-plank which led to the bank, strolled through the forest for some little distance, and finally came on the hunter sitting by the embers of a feebly-blazing fire, his back against a tree, while he moodily puffed at a corn-cob pipe.

He looked up when he heard their steps, greeted both with a nod, and observed:

"Ye needn't have come to me. It's my place to come to you, if I take your money."

His tone was gloomy and sullen, though the words were half apologetic; and he didn't offer to rise from his position.

Colonel Grey answered mildly:

"We preferred to come to you, as we need your services, colonel—"

The hunter looked up quickly.

"I've dropped that name hyar. Folks calls me Alligator Ike. You kin call me the same, 'specially you, cunnel. What d'ye want in this part of the country?"

The colonel took a seat on a piece of coquina* rock before he answered. Then he said in a tone of some hesitation:

"We've come here for the winter on account of my daughter's health. She has had some trouble with her lungs every winter, and has been ordered here."

Alligator Ike nodded.

"That's a common case, but you don't want a guide for that."

"That's true, but that's not all. You see I

* "Coquina" rock is a sort of crumbling coral, in which myriads of minute sea-shells are imbedded, which forms the basis of most of Florida. It is so soft as to be easily cut with iron tools.

have myself not a little curiosity about the interior of Florida, and my son Julian is fairly crazy to explore that mysterious lake, of which we have all heard so much, that goes by the name of Okeechobee."

He stopped and looked at Ike, but the hunter only refilled his pipe and smoked on.

At last the colonel said:

"I have made up my mind, if possible, to remove the veil that lies between our country and this mysterious lake. Here we are in an age of progress, and we Americans know as little of the interior of Florida and the Everglades as if it lay in the middle of Africa."

"Hum!" observed the alligator-hunter. "I reckon ye ain't fur wrong, far as Yanks is concerned. And what's more, ye ain't likely to know much more nuther, cunnel."

His black beard curled scornfully as he spoke, and Julian replied innocently:

"But if you'll guide us to the lake, we are willing to pay well."

Alligator Ike shook his head.

"Tain't no use, boy. The lake ain't in my keepin'. Them as lives round it won't stand no Yanks trapesin' 'bout 'em. Anywhar else ye like. Thar's Injun river—why don't ye go thar? That's the place fur sick folk; have to move to the next county to die; can't die on Injun river. Good fishing, hunting, anything ye want. Oranges and bananas for the trouble of picking. I'll guide ye there any time ye say."

"Ay, ay," returned Colonel Grey more heartily; "I've heard a good deal of Indian river. It's a very charming place, they say. But that's on the coast, isn't it? How could we get there with the yacht? She's not large enough to go outside, you know."

"Don't want her," retorted Alligator Ike.

"Go up beyond Mellonville a way with the boat till there's no more water, and then we'll find wagons to go 'cross the sand flats to Smyrna or Fort Canaveral. It's better for the ladies. They couldn't never get to Okeechobee, nor you nuther."

"I tell you what we'd better do," remarked Julian, eagerly. "Suppose we go to Indian river, which you say is such a nice place and leave the girls at the hotel? Send the yacht round alone."

Alligator Ike chuckled rudely.

"Hotel! Well, Yank, and whar's the hotel to come from? Nary hotel will you find thar, only a few planters like Dummits, who live in log houses and eat hog and hominy. Ain't no hotels nearer'n Jacksonville and St. Augustine."

"Then what are we to do if we don't take the yacht with us?" asked Julian, puzzled.

"Hum! Ask yer dad. He never had no hotels for four year or so, did he?"

Colonel Gray smiled.

"No. We can be independent of hotels in a climate like this, Julian. You know I had some tents packed away in the hold. I think we can get along at Indian river."

"But when we get there," pursued Julian, "I don't want to stay there. I want to see the lake that every one talks about and no one has seen."

Alligator Ike shook his head.

"Some's seen it and didn't think it what it was cracked up to be. Mebbe you'll say the same when you git thar, if you ever do."

"I'll get there if you guide me," said Julian.

"Will you do it?"

Colonel Grey interposed.

"We won't ask him yet. Wait till we get to Indian river, and then we'll see. In the mean time, I suppose you can put us in the way of hunting, Ike?"

Ike nodded indifferently.

"Ay, ay; all ye want. But I can't make ye hit anything if ye don't shoot straight. Whar d'ye want to go to-morrow?"

"As high up the river as we can, and thence to Indian river," said the colonel.

Ike nodded and resumed his pipe.

"All right; I'll be thar with ye."

Then he leaned back against the tree and closed his eyes in a manner that showed plainly he did not intend to be disturbed any further.

The colonel looked at him a moment and then made a signal to Julian to go away. The young man obeyed in silence, and Grey remained seated on his piece of coquina rock, looking into the fire till the footsteps of his son had died away.

Then he looked at Alligator Ike and found that the dark, glittering eyes of the hunter had opened again, and that Ike was looking at him from under his bent brows.

Grey coughed slightly as if embarrassed, but Ike said nothing, and it was the Massachusetts man who began at last.

"Colonel Pey—"

"I told ye once that name was dropped," said Alligator Ike, harshly. "My name's Ike Strang, or Alligator Ike, whichever ye choose."

"Well then, Ike, what is the reason that you repudiate my kindness in this way?" asked the colonel, mildly. "I wish to befriend you, if I can, as you once befriended me—"

Alligator Ike interrupted him with a low, bitter laugh.

"Yes, you befriended me—you did."

Grey flushed slightly as he answered:

"Well, did I not? But for me you would have been hunted down, ten years ago, when the Ku Klux Klan was raiding through all the Southern States. I recognized your handiwork and could have laid my hand upon you."

"And why did you not?" asked the hunter in a tone of some scorn.

"You know well why. Because you had been my friend in the days gone by, and because my wife was a Southern woman and related to you."

"Indeed. A great reason truly," retorted the hunter, in the same disdainful way. "You're sure there was no other?"

"What other could there be?" asked Grey.

"Simply that you couldn't have taken me," returned Ike, in his most sarcastic tones. "I never yet surrendered to a Yankee, and it's too late to begin now. If ye think I would, call on all your men out yonder. I'm one, and you are five or six. There's a price on my head yet, I believe. Earn it, if ye dare."

"You know well enough that I wouldn't do any such thing," said Grey, warmly. "In the first place, it's all nonsense talking of a reward being put on your head. It has lapsed long ago under the Statute of Limitations. The war ended nearly twenty years since, and we are quite satisfied to let the issues rest. Why can't you do the same? You have property yet, plenty of it, which you could get for the mere formality of coming in and taking the oath. Why should you doom yourself to the life of a hermit, out here in the cedar swamps, when you might be a civilized man among men, in the enjoyment of full citizenship?"

"You ask why," said Alligator Ike, in a peculiar tone. "As if you didn't know—you, the only man of all your cursed section that does."

"Upon my soul," returned Grey, earnestly; "on my word as a man, I do not know any reason why you should not come in, take the oath and resume possession of your property."

Alligator Ike curled his lip.

"Yes, I suppose I might, at the cost of giving up all I once held dear, confessing myself to be worthy of death, and swearing allegiance to the cause I hate; but I shall never do it, Grey. You mean well, but you don't know all. You've forced me to become your guide, but I told you you'd be sorry for it. 'Tis not too late to retreat now. I wish you no ill. Let me go away."

"I'll do no such thing," returned Grey, firmly. "I'll stick to you now till I bring you back under the flag, or I'll lose my life."

CHAPTER VIII.

INDIAN RIVER.

A LITTLE train of wagons, three in number, was making its slow and tedious way through the pine barrens between the St. John's and Indian rivers a few days after the meeting of Colonel Grey and Alligator Ike, accompanied by three mounted men, when one of them, who had been riding ahead, drew up his pony, waved his hat in the air, and cried out:

"Here we are, father! Here's Indian river!"

The speaker was Julian Grey, and the glitter of water before them was that celebrated inlet that goes by the name of Indian river. If you will take a good-sized map of the Southeastern States and look at Florida, you will notice that the St. John's river rises in a great marshy tract marked "Cedar Swamp," runs nearly north-west, parallel to the coast, for about a hundred and fifty miles, and then falls into the Atlantic near the border of Georgia, at Jacksonville, the great head-quarters of the Southern lumber trade.

Looking along the Atlantic coast from the mouth of the St. John's to Cape Florida, you will see that it is protected from storms all the way by barrier reefs and sandspits, which form long, narrow inlets.

One of these, south of Anastasia Island and St. Augustine, is called Mosquito Inlet; and the next south of that, with a length of a hundred miles or more, is known as Indian river, and is famous for the most entirely lovely winter climate in the Union.

The Grey family were stowed away, with all or most of their belongings, in Conestoga wagons, drawn by mules and oxen, as the owner of the wagon happened to have them, in the true slovenly, shiftless "cracker" style.

The ladies and the cook rode in the wagons, and, by scouring the whole country for some twenty miles, three ponies were finally procured for the use of Alligator Ike, the colonel and Julian.

They were little, scrubby, unkempt beasts, that had roamed the pine barrens for years, and, being seldom ridden, were full of tricks and vice, but a few hours' riding under heavy weights had reduced them to comparative quiet, and they had behaved quite well on the road, after the first fight for supremacy.

The road from Mellonville, head of navigation on the St. John's river, if road it could be called, was an old wagon-track over deep sand, with a desolate waste of pines stretching all round, as far as vision extended.

The trees were large and handsome to be sure; many of them rising a hundred feet in the clear, with boles six feet in diameter, but they gave

but little shade with their thin spiky foliage, and had that peculiar dried-up dusty appearance, which has given the tract in which they grow the name of "Barrens."

The ground was white sand, carpeted under the trees with a layer of brown spines and dead cones, slippery and hot to the touch.

A few grayish-green spears of thin wiry grass grew in the open spots; but nowhere did there seem to be any good, honest green turf.

The road was easily traced far ahead by the line of old tracks, but vanished as the wagons rolled nearer, though the slight depression could still be traced ahead, and Alligator Ike seemed to be confident of his way.

The wagons toiled slowly along, the wheels sinking deep into the sand, the axles creaking sadly in a monotonous and mournful cry that had its effect in damping the spirits of the party.

Alligator Ike told them that the distance from Mellonville to Mosquito Inlet was only about ten miles, but they preferred to go a little south of this, to the head of Indian river inlet, nearly double the distance, as he assured them that there was at least a house there, where dwelt a "Yank," as he expressed it, who kept a sailboat and had a house where he took boarders if they chanced to come his way.

And that twenty miles cost them two long and weary days' journey, with a night camp in the pine barrens, by the border of a dark and dismal-looking pool, where they heard the cry of wolves all night long, with the wailing note of the panther, as the hunter told them, when they asked him what it was.

The ladies of the party were frightened at the idea of wolves and panthers, but Ike told them they ran no danger as long as they kept up good fires, and this was an easy matter in the pine barrens, where the dry trees stood round them for the mere trouble of cutting, and fallen branches, dry as tinder, were ready to start a blaze.

Alice Grey and Inez Zuniga were especially timid at their lonely and unaccustomed position, but Mrs. Grey, for some reason, seemed to have no fear, and Alice declared that her mother looked as if she was used to it, and rather liked it than not.

The white-haired lady smiled rather sadly, and told her daughter:

"It is true, Alice. It reminds me of old times."

"Old times!" echoed Alice. "Why, mother, were you ever here before?"

"I was, dear, long ago, when I was younger than you are now. Never mind asking questions, I'll tell you, some day. Hark! what's that?"

It was the cry of a panther, close to the camp, and all the men gathered by the fire to heap on wood and watch for the animal, which they could see prowling about like a ghost, stealthy and noiseless, just outside the line of the fire-light, its green eyes glaring hungrily at them. Julian had brought out a Winchester rifle and wanted to fire at it, but Alligator Ike dryly said:

"Don't ye do it, young feller. Ye don't know painters as we do in Florriddy. They ain't like your Yankee painters."

"What do you mean?" asked Julian, nettled at the comparison, and ready to stand up for the honor of his section, even in wild beasts.

Alligator Ike gave a dry sniff.

"I mean that Yankee painters is cowed down by the crowds round them. They get shot at so often, they know the danger. These fellows don't. You send a shot into that painter, and he'll charge, like a hull company of raging devils."

"But surely we can shoot him," said Julian.

"Mebbe you kin, mebbe you'll miss him. He won't miss you; that's one sart'in thing. And if he begins to chaw any one in this party, you kin bet your boots he'll leave his mark."

Julian looked at the brown, stealthily-moving beast, and concluded it might be better not to disturb it, in which he was wise.

The panther of Florida is a very different beast from his cousin in the Northern woods, crowded by settlements, and accustomed to be hunted by man.

In a country where the population averages less than four people to the square mile, where nearly half the available territory is under water part of the year, and there are many thousands of square miles entirely unoccupied, the wild beasts are bold, and none bolder than the panther or painter, which will face man in broad daylight, and hunt him at night as if he were its legitimate prey.

The tourists were compelled to keep awake most of the night to feed their fires, and counted three brown, stealthily gliding brutes, sneaking round the camp.

When they went on in the morning, they found the tracks in the sand, all round their camp, and found from the size of one of them that they had missed seeing the "largest painter," as Ike said, "he'd ever known to be hangin' round."

Julian was wild to organize a hunt, but the alligator-killer told him they would have time enough for that after they got to Indian river.

"Get the ladies safe," he said, "and I'll give you all the hunt you want, young feller; mebbe more than your Yankee grit kin stand."

At which Julian retorted haughtily:

"I'll show you, before we've done, that a 'Yank' as you call them, can stand as much as any Johnny Reb that ever stepped, Ike Strang."

He said this just before they came in sight of Indian river, and was nettled by Ike's discordant and scornful laugh; so much so that he dug in his heels and galloped his pony ahead to get out of hearing of his disagreeable guide.

However, the sight of Indian river put all thoughts of disagreeable things out of their heads, and Julian forgot his anger in gazing at the lovely scene before him.

Indian river is always beautiful, and never more so than in the month of January. When ice and snow cover the North, the coconut and pineapple are growing by the banks of the inlet, and the orange groves are in full bloom and bearing at the same time. Dark-green groves, dotted with white flowers, with the yellow spheres of the oranges peering out of the dark foliage, present a combination to be seen on no other trees, and a perfume that is indescribably sweet.

Before the feet of the little party lay a noble river, a mile wide, bordered on one side with a lofty white bluff of coquina rock, on the other by a narrow ledge of sand, covered with dense tropical vegetation, and forming a complete screen from any storm that might come from the Atlantic.

Little islands, every one occupied by orange groves, dotted the surface of the river, and more than one white house would be seen, nestling among the dark groves, dotting the islands below or the bluffs above.

"There," said Alligator Ike, as he drew up by the wagon and pointed down, "thar, ladies, is Injun river. Ef you don't say it's as good a place to stop at in winter as ever you seen in all your lives, you kin take my head for a football."

And the girls were fain to agree with him as they looked down on the scene. Indian river is truly the garden of the Union.

CHAPTER IX. THE LIGHT-HOUSE.

AWAY to the south of Indian river stretches still another narrow piece of water, known as "Jupiter Inlet," and marked in the center by a tall white light-house, the only dwelling for many miles along the coast.

Here, about two weeks after the arrival of the Greys at Indian river, a small skiff, with a center-board and sail, was skimming along toward the light-house with Julian Grey in the stern steering.

The young man was somewhat changed from what he had been when he first struck Florida; not so neat and finikin in his dress, but looking browner and more self-reliant, without so much hauteur in the expression of his face.

He had started out on an expedition along the shores of Indian river, with his gun and rod for his sole companions, Alligator Ike having disappeared the next day after their coming to the inlet, without saying good-by to any one. The Greys had found, contrary to their belief and Ike's information, that there was quite a nice little population scattered along the shores of the inlet, principally composed of Southern families that had moved there after the war, their former homes being ruined.

They found no lack of people ready to take them in as boarders, at rates gauged by "what you Yanks will stand," but experienced civility everywhere and found life sufficiently pleasant. Julian, however, soon got tired of living in a comparatively civilized state. He had come to Florida to hunt, and he had made up his mind to see for himself whether Florida panthers and other game were as dangerous as Ike had said. He bought a skiff from one of the settlers, and went off on his own account, wondering much what had become of Ike, but set on proving that he was capable of taking care of himself. For three days he had coasted in his little boat down the placid stretch of Indian river, fairly enthralled with the lovely scenery, the profusion of fish that swarmed in the water, and the game that he saw on the shore as he sailed by.

Deer and bears were plentiful, and so tame that they would come down to the water's edge and stare at the skiff as it passed by, but for all their tameness he noticed one thing, that he could never get close enough for a good shot.

As long as he sat still at the helm, they would stand and stare, but as soon as he made a motion to pick up his rifle, the deer were off up the bank into a thicket, before he could draw a bead. Once or twice he fired hastily and missed, while on another occasion he managed to strike a bear which he saw on a bluff, but the animal, after a snarl and a jump to one side, shambled off, and he saw it no more, so that he had come to Jupiter Inlet without having killed anything more formidable than a wild duck.

In all his trip he had seen but few people, and met only one or two boats, so that it was with some idea of a chat, to relieve his loneliness that

he steered at last for Jupiter Light, in the warm haze of a glorious evening.

He had come to the place through a narrow passage, between a border of black mud on one side, and a spit of sand on the other.

Out of the mud, under the shelter of the bluffs, grew gloomy forests of mangroves, their gray roots sticking into the mud, supporting the trunk in mid-air, many feet from the ground, the roots themselves covered with oysters that had taken up their abode there.

Oysters lined the beach everywhere, and had accumulated in such enormous quantities as to make a reef more than a mile long in one place.

On the other side was a sandy island, beyond the mud and the mangroves, and the sand was covered with cocoa palms, and blossomed like a garden of flowers.

Before him, when he emerged from the narrows were the green waters of Hobe Sound, and far ahead he could see the white shaft of the light-house, marking the entrance to the ocean.

As the sun set, Julian ran his skiff under a steep bank, cast his little anchor and ascended the bank to a little house built at the foot of the light-tower.

As he came to the top, he saw no one but an old negro, sitting at the door of the little house, mending a net, and to him he called:

"Hallo, uncle, all alone?"

The old negro looked up and scratched his gray poll, looking puzzled as he replied:

"Scuse me, marse; but whar de debbil you come from?"

"Come from? why, the water, to be sure," was the reply. "Didn't you see my boat?"

"Can't say I did, marse. Whar you from?"

"Indian river of course."

"Dar's no of cou'se 'bout it, marse. I don't say you lies, 'cause dat ain't civil, but I does say I warn't lookin' dat way. Well, what you want?"

He did not rise from his seat or show any civility to the new-comer, and Julian's temper began to rise as he said:

"Want? What do you suppose I want? What does every one want who comes here after a day's sail? Are you the keeper of this light-house?"

"No, marse," returned the old darky, a little more politely. "Ole Cap Stevens he 'lows he keeps it. I'se only Uncle Joe, de helper."

"And where's the captain?" asked Julian.

"De cappen he done gone fishin' and won't be back all night," said Uncle Joe, looking at his nets in a way that convinced Julian he was lying.

"Well," he said, "I don't care where he is or what's become of him. I'm hungry and I want some supper. I'm willing to pay for it, too."

The old darky pricked up his ears.

"What dat you say?"

"I say I'm willing to pay, uncle. I'm from the North. D'you know what that means?" cried Julian rather sharply.

It seemed as if Joe did know.

No sooner had the words "I'm from the North" escaped Julian's lips than the old man threw his nets off his knee, and jumped up crying:

"Fo' de lawd, marse, why no say dat befo'? I thought you one of dem no-count white trash dat we done whipped in de wah! You come right into de cabin and you gets de bess of all we has. Fo' de lawd, marse, I'm right glad to see ye. Whar you from?"

His whole countenance seemed to be transformed as he looked at Julian.

In truth, the young man, lounging about the shores of Indian river, had fallen into the dress of the shiftless inhabitants, and his trip in the sail-boat had left him brown and dirty, so that Uncle Joe took him for one of the crackers round the country, whom he hated cordially.

But as soon as he found he was "from de Norf," the black man was all hospitality. He beamed with smiles, and became positively affectionate as he led Julian into the cabin at the foot of the tall light-tower.

"I done tole ye a big lie, marse," he chuckled.

"I done said Marse Cap Stevens was 'way. He ain't. He up in de tow' now, gittin' de light ready. And you is f'om de Norf, honey? Golly, dat's good. I ain't see'd no one from dah, since de lass yeah, when dem officah come. You set right down hyar, marse, while I call up de tow' to tell Marse Stevens you hyar. Golly, he be jess jumpin' glad when he hyah it."

The old man hobbled stiffly to the foot of the staircase that led up the shaft of the tower. Julian saw that the cabin was built of coquina rock, and jutted out from the door of the tower, while a spiral staircase led up the interior of the shaft.

Up the tower old Joe shouted:

"Marse Stevens! Marse Stevens!"

"Hilloa!" came down a faint answer from aloft, with a New England twang.

"Gemman f'om de Norf done come see ye, Marse Stevens!" bellowed Joe, and some sort of an unintelligible hail came back in reply, when Joe turned his face round, beaming with welcome, and hurried to lay the table, talking all the while.

"You likes fish, honey? Marse Stevens, he done caught de mous'ousest jew-fish you ebber

seen, dis berry maw'nin', and we was gwine to hab him faw breakfast. Now we cooks a bit for suppah. You do'no' what jew-fish is. Yah, yah! You jess come hyar. Look a' dat now. Dat's a jew-fish, and he taste jess five times as nice as he look."

He took Julian to the back part of the cabin and showed him, hanging up, an enormous fish, strongly resembling a perch, of a dark olive-green in color, and measuring about six feet in length.

"Dar, honey," he said, rubbing his hands, "dat's a jew-fish, an' we don' ketch dat kind more'n once a yeah, p'r'aps. Now you come and set right down hyar in de big chaiah. Marse Stevens he make dat chaiah himself fo' de kump'ny. I gets de suppah d'reckly."

He set Julian down into a huge reclining-chair, made of some dark, hard indigenous wood, with a dried oxhide thrown over it in such a way as to yield to every angle of the body and form a luxurious half-chair, half-couch.

"You like dat chaiah?" continued Uncle Joe, as he bustled about, noticing Julian's air of lazy contentment. "Dat what dey call Spanish chaiah. Dem Spanishers dey used to be pow'ful lazy in de ole times, and dey loaf 'bout all de yeah roun' in dem chaiahs. You likes cawn-bread, marse? Ole Joe he reckon to make de bess cawn-bread in Floridy."

The old man vibrated from one end of the little cabin to the other, diving into lockers to fetch out his stores, feeding the little stove with splinters of pitch-pine, and generally behaving like a benevolent colored angel, while Julian lay back in the huge Spanish chair and watched everything with lazy contentment.

The cabin of the light-house strongly resembled the cabin of a ship, save that the walls were built of rough coquina rock and the roof thatched with palm leaves.

The windows were small round apertures, like the bull's-eyes of a ship, the frames having evidently been taken from some wreck; the room was surrounded with ship's lockers, in which all the stores were kept, and down one side was ranged a regular tier of berths, taken bodily out of some vessel and set up just as they used to be on their former craft, bedding and all. From the rafters, made of ship's timbers, hung several sets of hooks for suspension of hammocks; a long ship's glass lay on a rack, and under the telescope was a stand of rifles, revolvers, cutlasses and pikes, just like the arms-rack of a man-of-war.

Old Joe noticed Julian's curious glance, and went on gabbling:

"Yes, yes, dis a cur'ous kin' of place, honey, ain't it? Ebberyt'ing hyar war put up by Marse Stevens and ole Joe, sence de wah. Da Guv'ment don't give no'ting but jess de supplies fo' de yeah, and de pay of de light-keeper and his help—dat's me. Marse Cap Stevens and me, we done build it all and stock it all f'om de wracks, and now we live pooty cumf'able. What you t'ink?"

"I think you must be rather lonesome most of the year," said Julian. "Are you all alone with the light-keeper?"

"All alone, honey, all alone, 'cep' when gemmen f'om de Norf like you comes roun'. Jess as well, honey, jess as well. Don' wan' no cum-p'ny mos' times. 'Tain't wholesome. I see de time when—"

Joe suddenly stopped and seemed to think he had said too much: for he finished setting his table, gave a shake to the frying-pan in which he was just heating some grease, and then bustled off to the jew-fish from which he cut a huge slab, without leaving a bone in the part selected, and began to cut this again into slices, just as they heard a heavy foot on the stairs.

Julian turned his head to the light-house and saw, entering there, a man with an empty sleeve pinned up over his breast, clad in a sort of dark-blue uniform.

This man saluted him in military fashion, saying:

"Good-morning, sir. Welcome to Jupiter Light."

CHAPTER X. THE KEEPER.

THE one-armed man had a pleasant, intelligent face, and his manner was full of kindness as he welcomed Julian, with whom he entered into conversation, showing, to the young man's surprise, all the marks of a well-educated man, very different from what one would expect to find in one whose duties were confined to keeping a lantern clean and a light burning in the tower of a lonely light-house.

Julian soon found that Captain Charles Stevens had been an officer during the war, employed at the Southwest; that he had lost his arm at the taking of Vicksburg, that he had suffered some grave family loss of which he did not seem inclined to speak much, and that he had come to his present post from choice.

"You must be a lover of loneliness," said the young man, when he heard this avowal. "You don't see many people here, I should suppose."

"The supply ship comes once a year with oil for the lamp and stores for the light-house," said Stevens, smiling rather sadly. "She stays about two days generally. Then in the winter I see a

few, very few, parties of sportsmen come here to fish and enjoy the duck shooting. Outside of that no one comes I care to see."

"And do you like the loneliness?" asked Julian, a little curiously.

"Like it? No. But I have to endure it. It gives me opportunity for doing good to my fellow-beings. I have saved more than one vessel from going ashore in the storms that come up the edge of the Gulf Stream. But never mind that. You are here and I am no longer lonely. Joe, is supper ready?"

"Yes, Marse Capten."

And they sat down to an excellent supper, to which Julian did ample justice, while the keeper of the light-house began to talk of the life along the coast and tell fishing and sporting stories.

"After supper," he said to Julian, "you must come up the tower and enjoy the view from the top. It's very beautiful and it's full moon in a few nights."

"How far can one see?" asked Julian.

"About forty miles all round us. Inland one can just discern on a clear day the gleam of Lake Okeechobee, of which we hear so much."

Julian started, and his face lighted up.

"Lake Okeechobee?" he cried. "Is it possible? In full sight do you say?"

Stevens nodded.

"Certainly."

"Then one can reach it from here?"

"I did not say that," returned the light-keeper.

"But why not?"

"Well, you'll see to-morrow in daylight. The fact is that between here and there the country is partly pine barren—but only for a short, a very short distance. After that come the great Everglades that no man has ever thoroughly explored, except the Indians and the—"

And here Stevens stopped, just as suddenly as Joe had done before, and seemed to be unwilling to say any more.

Julian was puzzled.

"Mr. Stevens," he said gravely, "is there any mystery about the Everglades that you know and cannot tell me?"

"There is," responded Stevens as gravely. "I have known other men come down here and try to find it out, but they have lost their lives in the attempt, and I don't want you to do the same, Mr. Grey."

Julian's eyes glowed.

"What! a mystery, a real mystery? Just the thing I want to explore. You old soldiers think that we youngsters are good for nothing nowadays, but I'll show you we're not. Captain Stevens, tell me all about this mystery. Who is it lives in the Everglades that knows all about them, and why can't I get over forty miles to a lake in plain sight?"

"Simply because this is Florida, Mr. Grey. No one cares for this end of the Union, inhabited by 'crackers' and supposed to produce nothing but oranges and mosquitoes. The Government keeps up the light-houses, just as the Confederate Government did during the war, and that's all it does. Joe and I have lived here for fifteen years. I come from Massachusetts; he was a slave who ran away to our army and served in my company. The people keep aloof from us and hate us. At one time we were in danger of our lives. That was during the Ku Klux excitement. Now that's all over. But even now, Joe and I know that something is going on in those Everglades that's not all right, and it's no use our reporting it. None would believe us."

"And what's that?" asked Julian.

Stevens looked around him apprehensively, and exchanged glances with Joe.

"No, it won't do to speak here," he said.

"You don't know all that goes on here. I'll tell you, but not here, and only on the promise of inviolable secrecy. It's not my life and yours alone that depends on this. There may be hundreds of others also."

"Hundreds of others?"

"Yes, indeed."

"But how?"

Stevens looked at him earnestly.

"Can't you see what I mean? This is a light-house. In storm and calm that light must be kept up every night. The sailor looks for it, and if he misses it he is liable to run on the reefs anywhere. His bearings have vanished. He knows not where he is. Half the coasters that ply along here have no means of knowing where they are, but by watching the light-houses."

"But you don't mean to say that—"

"Hush, I tell you. We must not talk here. Let us go outside and see if any one is near."

Julian, in some excitement, followed his host out of the little cabin into the open air, and found the scene changed to one of still more marvelous beauty than when he had landed.

The light-house was built on the highest point to be found in that land of marsh and sand-heap, a bluff of coquina rock some forty or fifty feet above the water's edge on a little island separated from the mainland by a narrow channel.

In front of the door to the east lay the broad Atlantic ocean, a sea of silver ripples in the light of the moon, while the low, yellow sand-

pits to the north and south marked the entrance to the inlet directly in front of the light.

Everything was quite still, and the soft rippling of the waves on the sandy beach with the low sigh of the wind round the cabin only served to make the loneliness more impressive.

Julian looked toward the shore over the little channel. Nothing could be seen there but a bluff of white coquina rock, crowded with dark woods of palm and cypress, shutting out further view of the interior.

"It seems to me," said the young man, "that one might talk as much as one pleased. Who's to hear us? That channel's a good hundred yards wide, and I've seen nothing but deer and bears in the woods along the shore."

Stevens pressed his arm softly.

"How do you know there's no one there?" he said in a low tone. "Remember this is a light-house. Look yonder."

He pointed to a white patch of light, brighter than the moonlight, which was moving over the dark face of the woods in front.

"That's the glow from the lantern," he said. "It can be seen forty miles away. The Indians at Okeechobee know it, the bears and panthers come down to stare at it; every one sees it. Come inside up the tower and then I'll tell you why I'm averse to speaking down here."

Julian saw that there was something in his host's mind not to be lightly shaken off, and he followed him into the cabin once more.

As they went in Stevens said to Joe:

"Put up the bars, Joe. There's no telling when we may have to stand a siege again."

Joe made a military salute and went to the door of the cabin, where he began to put up some bars of iron, as heavy as if he were barricading a fortress, and Stevens beckoned Julian on to the inner door, leading to the interior of the light-tower, when they began to ascend a winding staircase toward the revolving lantern of Jupiter Inlet Light.

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE LANTERN.

ARRIVED at the top, Stevens said:

"Come out on the balcony and see the view."

Julian followed him and gazed on a scene of wonderful beauty.

It seemed as if Labrador and Jamaica had joined hands in the landscape, for the northern pine and the southern palm flourished side by side on the sand, the oak and the orange grew together, while the maple waved on the coquina bluffs above the dark mangrove of the tropics in the mud below.

The course of Indian river could be traced for many a mile in the moonlight, and Jupiter Inlet stretched away on the other side to Lake Worth, while behind the light-house, from the land side, came in a narrow winding river, that widened here and there into broad, shallow lakes, revealed in silver among the dark trees.

Julian looked out in all directions from the lofty balcony, and then asked:

"Where's the nearest house?"

Stevens pointed down over the railing.

"Under your feet, just fifty yards," he said.

"Old Joe and I live there."

"Yes, yes, I know that, but I mean besides that?"

Stevens pointed to the north.

"Forty miles off, that way," he said.

"And the other way?"

Stevens turned and looked south.

"About a hundred miles, by old Fort Dallas, at Miami."

"And behind us, to the west?"

Stevens shook his head.

"Nobody knows but the Seminoles, and there are not many of them left."

"And those other people?"

"Yes."

"Who are these other people," asked Julian.

"Come inside and I'll tell you," said Stevens.

Full of curiosity Julian complied, and they entered the light room where the flash light was slowly revolving behind the prismatic reflectors, throwing all sorts of rainbow hues over the little chamber.

The air was cool and pleasant; for all the ventilators were open and the soft sea breeze came through the open door.

"Now tell me why you would not speak outside?" said Julian curiously.

"Because," said Stevens, in a low tone, "some one might hear us. You don't know how far sounds are carried in these still solitudes."

"But suppose they did hear us, what of it?" asked the young man, surprised. "You're not afraid of the Indians, are you?"

"Hush!" said Stevens impressively. "Young man, you don't know the danger as well as I do. You have not lived here as I have for fifteen years, with the knowledge that you are in the power of a band of men who can destroy, not only you, but other innocent persons, at any time they please. Did you ever hear of the Florida Wreckers?"

"Well, I've heard the name, but never knew any particulars about them."

"Then I can tell you. The Florida Wreckers are just nothing more nor less than Florida pirates; and if ever the time comes when the Gov-

ernment finds out what they're doing, there will be trouble."

"Do you know what they are doing?"

"I do to my cost."

"Then why don't you inform the Government?"

Stevens sighed.

"Because it would be useless. They would not believe me, and might remove me."

"How do you know?"

"Listen to what I tell you, and then think what they said when I wrote to them all about it. I must promise, however, that at the time when I lost my arm, I received a shell wound on the side of the head, which frequently causes me the most painful headaches, but has not in any way impaired my mind. You don't think I look like a crazy man, do you?"

He looked earnestly at Julian, and Julian, on his part, returned as earnest a gaze.

"No," he said, "you don't, as far as I can judge, but then I've never seen much of crazy men, you know; so I'm no judge."

Stevens smiled.

"Cautiously answered. Well, now, I'm going to tell you a story that you may believe or not, as you please. I may have dreamed it all, as the Washington people suggest, but it's as real to my mind as the battle when I lost my arm. First, remember this. I came to this light-house in the days soon after the war, when white and black were struggling fiercely for the mastery, when the Ku Klux were riding all over the South, and when Joe and I were all alone, with the loneliness for our only protection. Did you ever hear of a man called Alligator Ike?"

Julian started and asked in turn:

"Alligator Ike? What? Do you know him?"

"To my cost. Have you seen him lately?"

"Why, yes. He saved my life, and guided us to Indian river, then left my family in the lurch and took his departure without a word of warning."

Stevens listened attentively and replied:

"Please tell me how you met him, and what passed."

Julian went on and told the whole story.

When he had finished, Stevens observed:

"It is the same man. You say he refused to guide you to Okeechobee?"

"Yes. He said no one had been there."

"He was wrong. Men have been there, but not this way. They have run down the Kissimmee river and come out by the Caloosahatchee on the west coast. But the mystery does not lie that way. It lies between Okeechobee, Jupiter Inlet and Hillsboro Inlet. But you shall hear it all."

So saying, Stevens took a last look outside the balcony, then came back and began his story.

"For two years, Joe and I were not molested. No one came near us, but no one hurt us. We kept the light burning, and attended to our business. I shot and fished in all directions, and saw no one to disturb me. I never was very fond of society, on account of some trouble I had in former years, of which it is not necessary to speak, but I had my surfeit of solitude. I grew to relish Joe's quaint remarks, and to find time hang a little heavy on my hands, till I took up natural history for a hobby, and collected a lot of stuffed birds and animals that I'll show you some day."

"The light is very little trouble when one knows how to manage it, and Joe was competent to do all that was to be done about it, as much so as I myself. So I fell into the habit of making my trips longer every day, till once or twice I stayed out all night in the Everglades."

"It was one night when I was out there that I made up my mind to find out the cause of the Hidden Smoke."

"The Hidden Smoke! What's that?" asked Julian.

"Ah, you've not seen it yet. I'll show it to you in the morning, or perhaps you might see the glow to-night, though it's almost too clear. Come outside and look to the west."

They went out on the balcony and waited till the flash of the lantern was out at sea and the land side dark, when Stevens pointed out over the dark landscape, all dotted with gleaming pools of water, to a point in the southwest.

"Look yonder," he said, "under the bright star. Do you see nothing?"

"No," said Julian.

"Look again while I describe it. There is a cloud of black smoke there in the daytime. Every now and then you can catch its outlines, even now, against that star. See. It has vanished. Now it comes again."

By watching closely, Julian could see what he meant; the paling of the bright star, to reappear a little later as if some mist had blown away. Every now and then a faint glow would be seen in the mist, like the glimmer of very distant lightning, and Julian noticed it.

"What's that glow?" he asked.

Stevens went into the lantern and brought out a very long ship's glass.

"Look at it through that," he said, "and you'll see as well as I. That glass is a very good one, like everything the Government gives us in the light-house."

Julian adjusted the telescope, which was

a very fine and expensive instrument, and trained it on the place where he had seen the flashes.

For some time he saw nothing and then the flash came again, enabling him to see that it was reflected from a mass of smoke or cloud, clearly defined against the stars by the powerful object glass.

"Yes, I see it now," he said. "It seems to be a great fire somewhere. What is it?"

"That has been asked by many a man, for the last twenty years," replied Stevens. "That smoke, sometimes thicker, sometimes thinner, has been visible in that same place, ever since I came to Jupiter Light, and the keeper I relieved told me he had seen it during all his term of service.

"Expeditions have been got up to find out what it was, but no one ever succeeded in reaching it from this side, and it is not visible from any other place. From the direction and the charts, I had made out very clearly that it must be somewhere to the south of Lake Okeechobee, but I found out, very soon after my arrival here, that one cannot depend much on the charts, and it was to correct them that I finally set out in a light skiff to explore for myself and find out, if I could, where that smoke came from. I knew from the distinctness with which I saw it in the daytime through the telescope, that it could not be more than forty miles off. At least I fancied so. My only doubt was whether I saw it from the fire from which it sprung, or only the top of the smoke over the curvature of the earth. In the latter case there was no telling how far off it was. That depended on the light of the smoke. Some days it disappeared almost entirely and could only be seen as a low bank on the horizon. This made me think it must be a long way off. On calm days it was most distinct. Seven years ago this winter I set out alone to explore it."

CHAPTER XII.

ALONE IN THE EVERGLADE.

"I STARTED out from the light-house," pursued Stevens, "at daybreak one morning in the skiff. I had made that skiff with Joe's help on purpose to suit me. Having only one arm, I cannot row a pair of oars, but I have learned to scull a boat from the stern nearly as fast as a man can row, and the method has many advantages in these narrow channels.

"I took with me a pair of revolvers, one of them of the large size and caliber, fit to shoot all ordinary game, and I had provisions for a week in the boat in case I should not be able to shoot game enough to live on.

"I left word with Joe to attend to the light while I was gone, and started out full of confidence. It was just after the heaviest of the rainy season, and I know that the Everglades were covered with about two feet of water in the shallowest places. I could go anywhere in my skiff.

"I went straight up the Locohatchee (that is the little river you see behind the light-house) and by evening had come into such shallow water that I had to stop sculling and use the push-pole, with the boat scraping the mud. I saw that I had come nearly to the head of the stream and pushed toward what I thought an island, but found to be merely the bank of the river, in a place higher than usual.

"Wading into the water on the other side, I found it growing deeper, so I concluded to drag my skiff over the bank and launch it on the overflowed land.

"I found that the Locohatchee, like most of these Southern rivers, had in the course of time raised its own bed by bringing down mud from the interior, till it was actually higher than the country round it, and after I had dragged the skiff over the bar, I had no more trouble in sculling it merrily away, heading straight for that distant smoke I had seen from the light-house.

"I say 'seen from the light-house,' for I could no longer see it after I touched the ground, showing it must be a long way off, but I had taken the bearings by the compass, and felt sure of my direction, so I sculled steadily on.

"The country exactly resembled an immense lake, filled with islands.

"The water was smooth as a mill-pond, and everywhere I looked, the prospect was just the same as everywhere else.

"The cypresses and live-oaks grew in clumps out of the water, making islands in some places, in others allowing the skiff to glide between their trunks in two feet of water.

"The gray Spanish moss hung from everything, and the india-rubber vines were strangling the palm trees here and there.

"Game? As for that, there seemed no end to it, especially birds. Herons, white, blue, green; cranes of half a dozen varieties; spoonbills, wild ducks, the sacred ibis; mallard, teal, canvas-backs. I saw them all, and many more, while on the larger islands deer were feeding, and black bears were rooting on others. As for foxes and hares, they could be seen everywhere, and I counted more than one pack of wolves, five or six in a bunch.

"But all this game was so surprisingly tame that it was easy to see it had never been hunted, and more than once I sculled my skiff within twenty feet of a heron before he would open his wings and flap away.

"As for the bears, they used to come down and stare at me, and one fellow had the impudence to chase the skiff; but the water was just too shallow for him to swim well, and too deep to wade, so that I easily kept ahead of him.

"In the evening, as the sun set, I was delighted to discover a low, black cloud, which I knew from its shape to be the long-sought smoke, puffing up at intervals to obscure the bright disk.

"Then I made my preparations to go into camp for the evening, and keep off the alligators, who were uncomfortably bold.

"In the shallower parts of the Everglades I saw none of these amiable beings, but every now and then I came on what was evidently in the dry season a river, outlined by the dark color of its waters, and wherever I came to one of these I found alligators frequent, and so bold and voracious that I began to be frightened, for fear they would mob the skiff.

"One fellow came close alongside and tried to knock the push-pole out of my hand, taking it, I suppose, for a living creature, and I only drove off him and his comrades by putting a revolver-bullet in his eye, and so settling him.

"I'm a pretty good revolver shot, anyhow, and I held the pistol within about a foot of that alligator's eye when I fired.

"The report drove away the rest, but you may imagine that I made quick time over every one of those black streams that I came to.

"A few of the alligators came out of the streams into the shallow water of the flooded Everglade, but these gave me less trouble. They seemed to be timid out of the deep water.

"That evening I went to an island that rose to an unusual height above the inundation, owing to a mass of rock in the center, and on that rock grew five or six maples and two live oaks, while cypresses fringed the edge, growing in the mud.

"I judged that on the rocks I should be safe from alligators, who seldom leave the mud, and are not made for climbing trees.

"I dragged my skiff up the rocks, several feet above the water, when I was surprised to find that I was not the only creature that had sense to appreciate the convenience of this rocky island; for I ran right into a pair of bears, coming on them so suddenly that they jumped up, snorting and snarling fiercely, not five feet away from me.

"And the she-bear had cubs with her!

"If you've ever hunted bears you know what that means.

"There was I, with only my revolver, and an angry she-bear coming at me.

"Without thinking what I did, I jumped behind a tree, and as she put her head around, almost touching me, I fired a snap shot at her.

"As luck would have it the muzzle of the pistol touched her eye, and she dropped like a log, while the old he-bear, like the cowardly brute he was, scuttled away into the water, leaving the cubs behind him, and making me master of the situation.

"To cut a long story short, I supped on bear-meat that night, and slept in the branches of a live-oak, for which precaution I had reason to be thankful when morning came.

"During the night I heard the alligators below in the Everglade all round me, and they climbed the rocks and swarmed all over the island. I could see the great reptiles crawling to and fro over the rocks, and fighting over something, and in the morning I found what was the matter.

"They had finished up the carcass of the old she-bear, eaten the cubs, which were too young to climb, and had finished up everything that I had left below.

"Luckily I had taken up my arms, oar and push-pole into the tree, and they could not eat the skiff, or I might have been a prisoner on that island.

"I had to go out without breakfast, and fast till I could shoot something, but in that land of plenty I had no difficulty in finding food within half an hour.

"I had grown so fastidious that I would take nothing less than a blue-winged teal, which I secured in a very short time, and lighted my fire on another island for breakfast.

It was while I was sailing slowly away from this place that I again saw the distant smoke, or thought I did, through an opening between the innumerable islands, and headed toward it till the view was interrupted by a broad belt of cedar swamp, barring the way with an impenetrable screen of verdure, and so far elevated above the level of the rest of the Everglade that I saw at once it would be impossible for me to take the skiff through it.

"The ground was under water, it was true; but only partially so, while the underbrush showed that the swamp was dry most of the year.

"I found that I should have to skirt the belt

till I came to the end of it, or plunge through and drag the skiff after me.

"I preferred the former course, for I had become so much used to sculling that I hated to wade. I skirted the edge of the cedar swamp therefore, going due south by the compass, nearly half the day, the scenery growing more and more lovely, the game more abundant and tame.

"But the belt of half-dried swamp still stretched before me, impenetrable as ever to the boat, and at noon I concluded to shoot a hare, that sat up on the bank staring at me, and have my dinner at the edge of this swamp.

"I was able to push up within ten feet of the little creature and pop it over with my small pistol, which made less noise than the other; but hardly had the whip-like crack disturbed the echoes under the cedars than I heard the caterwauling of a panther in the swamp, and saw the brown beast creeping from tree to tree, as if it were determined to make a meal of my hare.

"Such boldness I had never seen in a panther before, but it seemed to have no fear whatever of me, and actually wanted to steal my poor little hare before I could get it into the skiff.

"This I was determined it shouldn't, and I fired at the brute with my large revolver, the second shot striking just where I aimed, under the left shoulder.

"It was the worst mistake I ever made in my life, except coming here.

"In a moment that brown, silent, gliding creature became transformed into a raging demon, with fiery eyes and claws distended, while it bounded straight into the water, and came tripping and plunging toward my skiff.

"I seized the oar and began to scull away as fast as I could into deep water, but before I could get there the panther was close astern, snapping at the blade of the oar, and I saw it would climb into the boat in another minute. With a sudden effort I swept the boat to one side, darted the blade of the oar in the beast's face, cutting it across the nose, and then pulled in the loom, took up my big pistol, and leveled it over the gunnel at the panther, as it swam on at me!

"In another moment the animal was alongside the boat, and I threw my body to the other side, to keep it from hooking its claws over the gunnel of the boat.

"Then I saw the end of a paw come over against the sky, knew the animal was bound to pull me over, but hung on, to give it all the work possible.

"Presently the boat was on an even keel and I saw the greenish yellow eyes glaring at me and the lips parted in a grin of rage. In that same moment I put my pistol into this beast's face and fired into the open mouth.

"I heard a snort and howl, saw the great claws relax, felt the boat going over after it, and heard the sharp crack of a rifle close by me.

"The next moment the skiff rocked back again, and I saw the panther in the water, rolling over on its side stone dead, while a man in a small dug-out canoe, sat, with the smoke still curling out of his rifle, not twenty feet away from me.

"I was astounded, you may believe. I had neither seen or heard him, and where he sprang from was a mystery; but what surprised me still more was the appearance of the man.

"A handsomer fellow it would be hard to find, with his black hair and beard and stalwart figure, but that was not what surprised me. The first view did not satisfy me. I rubbed my eyes, unwilling to believe their evidence. It seemed to me that I was transported back ten years, to the time before I lost my arm."

"And what was it that surprised you so much?" asked Julian, unable to repress his curiosity.

"It was his dress. As I'm a living man, he wore the full Confederate uniform, just as I used to see it during the war, with a general's star on his collar, gold lace stripes on his arm and the old C. S. A. belt round his waist—"

"Why, that's the same as Alligator Ike wears," ejaculated Julian.

"Exactly," returned Stevens quietly. "It was the same man, and he was all alone with me."

"And what did you do?" asked Julian.

"The instinct of old times came over me. You don't know how we used to hate the gray-coats then. I had my pistol leveled at him in less time than it takes to tell, and called out to him 'Surrender!'"

"And what did he say?"

"Strange. He just laughed and answered in the coarse 'cracker' dialect: 'Well, Yank, reckon ye're jokin', ain't ye, seein's I jest finished that 'ere painter fur ye. Put up that pop, put it up.'"

"And what did you do?"

"I was dazed, astounded, doubtful, and I lowered my pistol without thinking. In another moment he had swept his dug-out beside me and held out his hand, saying: 'Come, Yank, I b'ar no malice. Put her thar.' I did so, and then I found the devilish cunning of the man. I had but one hand, and he was at least forty pounds heavier than I was. In a moment he

had dragged me to him by the wrist; had thrown my revolver into his boat, and growled out triumphantly: 'You're a blank of a smart Yank! Now you're my prisoner.' And so I was. Hello, what's that?"

As he spoke they heard the sound of a voice from the mainland below hailing:

"Light-house, ahoy-oy-oy!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE ATTACK ON THE LIGHT-HOUSE.

JULIAN GREY was annoyed by the hail, for he was just beginning to be interested in the story of the keeper.

"Let them shout," he said, pettishly. "You finish the story. They can wait."

Stevens shook his head as he rose.

"You don't know," he said. "I've reasons to obey these men. I must go outside. Hark!"

Crack! went a rifle outside, and the bullet went singing over the light-house, while Stevens ran out on the balcony, calling down:

"Don't be in such a hurry there, I'm coming as fast as I can."

"Then come quicker, darn your Uncle Sam's buttons!" called out a voice below. "We-uns and you-uns ain't got no need to palaver so long."

Julian thought he recognized the voice of Alligator Ike in the reply; but that might have only been on account of the story he had just listened to.

Whoever it was, Stevens answered down in a tone that showed some anger:

"Well, what do you want, now you're here?"

"Who came to see you this evening?" shouted the distant voice.

"No one who has any business with you," retorted Stevens. "It's a gentleman from the North."

"What's his name?" cried the voice.

"James Brown," cried Stevens.

"You lie!" roared the voice below, and with that "pion" came a bullet close to Stevens's head, at which the keeper instantly ran into the lantern, looking pale and angry.

"It's no use," he said, hurriedly; "I've tried to keep the peace, but they won't have it. I'm glad you're here for a witness to it. We've got to fight."

"But why, why? what for? what's the matter?" asked Julian, bewildered. "Who are these men, and what do they want?"

"You'll find out before morning," said Stevens, gloomily. "I'm afraid they want you; but they shall not have you while I'm alive to help you, that's certain. Come down-stairs. We shall have to barricade securely. I'm afraid your boat will be gone to-morrow."

"But who are these men?" asked Julian, as they hurriedly descended the stair.

"The wreckers, the pirates, the villains," said Stevens hurriedly. "The Government people won't believe it, till it's too late. Come on."

As they descended, they heard the clang of bars and bolts, as old Uncle Joe, who had been roused from a doze by the shots, hastily secured the door of the cabin below.

When they at last got down to the lower house, however, all was still outside for some time, and Stevens motioned to Julian to get his rifle ready, whispering:

"There's a good moon outside. I can fire as well as ever through a loop-hole. Don't wait to parley, but shoot the first man you see."

Then Julian, trembling with excitement, for it was the first time he had ever been in a position to meet angry men with deadly weapons, saw old Uncle Joe drag a tall office stool to the side of the thick stone wall, and open one of the bull's-eyes, through which he poked out a Remington rifle, of the coarse pattern furnished the common sailors of the navy.

Stevens took another and pointed a third place to Julian, when the three men peeped out into the moonlight through the little bull's-eye holes, and commanded a view of the rocky path that led up from the inside channel.

There, in the channel, to Julian's dismay, was a scow loaded with men, on whom the moonlight glanced, showing that all carried rifles of some kind, and were dressed in gray and brown.

Remembering what Stevens had said, he leveled his rifle and fired straight into the boat, the shot being replied to by a yell so shrill that he thought the men must be boys. Then the scow moved forward more rapidly, and he saw the occupants come running up the path like mad as he fired again.

The second shot was replied to by a second yell, even shriller than the first, and a perfect tempest of bullets rattled on the door of the little hut and against the walls, splintering the soft coquina rock and sending fragments in at the bull's-eyes, just as Stevens and old Joe fired together.

Then, through the smoke, Julian saw the ghostly gray figures dash up to the hut, and in another moment they were out of sight under the round bull's-eyes, while blows began to thunder on the door outside, out of range of the rifles.

Stevens jumped down from his post and cried:

"Into the tower. They'll soon break down this door, but the other will defy them."

The three men caught up a box of ammunition and their rifles and bolted for the inside door of the tower, just as the blows outside became deafening and the wood began to crack.

Once inside they slammed to a huge iron door of four or five thicknesses, the same as one made for a safe, and Stevens remarked with a grim smile, as he blew the smoke from his rifle:

"Now Johnny Reb can shoot away, all he likes. I'll have something to say."

The closing of the door, which shut fast with a spring, had the effect of cutting off the din without almost entirely. They could hear the sounds of blows, muffled by the thick walls, till they resembled the tapping of wood-peckers, but that was all.

Then Stevens pointed out a flight of steps inside the tower, which led to a ledge, at the top of which was a line of loop-holes.

The three defenders took their position on the ledge and commanded, from the loop-holes, a view of the cabin.

As yet it was empty, but they could hear the crashing of blows on the outer door, and Stevens whispered:

"They're coming in. Fire as soon as you see any one."

A moment later, the outer door fell, and a crowd of gray figures darted in, when the three defenders fired together, saw a man drop, and heard a second rattling volley. One bullet came in at a loop-hole, just missing Julian's head, and the young man started to one side, a proceeding which drew from Uncle Joe a chuckle and the remark:

"Dat was a close call, honey. Nebber mind. A miss, good's ten mile."

Then Julian looked through the loop-hole again, and saw that all the lights in the cabin had been extinguished, while he heard the sound of oaths and savage execrations, as the assailants crowded round the iron door, out of range of the loop-holes.

Then followed a dead silence for nearly a minute, when some one outside shouted:

"Hello, Yanks inside there! Hello!"

"What do you want?" cried Stevens.

"We want that young feller from the North," cried back the voice. "He's a spy, come after us, and we're going to have him."

"He is my guest, I'm in charge of this light-house, and you can't have him," said Stevens firmly. "I warn you that if you persist in attacking this light-house, you'll bring on yourself the vengeance of the Government—"

He was interrupted by a burst of laughter.

"Government be darned! What do we keer for the Government?" shouted a voice in the darkness.

"Open that door, or we'll blow it in."

"You can kill us all," retorted Stevens, "but you can't hide the deed. This young man belongs to a good family in the North, and his people will come after him. You've hidden your tracks for all these years, but you can't hide them forever, and this time you'll be found out—"

He was interrupted again by a rude laugh, and the same voice shouted:

"We've been found out too often, Stevens. We've got the whip-hand of you in Washington and you know it. Come, you'd better give up the boy to us. We won't hurt him."

"Why do you want him?" cried Stevens.

"Jest to see he don't go explorin', like you did," said the voice. "We don't want to kill him, but he's got to swear or die."

"You can't have him," cried Stevens. "He's my guest, and you'll have to kill us all, or none."

Julian Grey, who had listened to this colloquy, here shouted through the loop-hole:

"Hollo! Alligator Ike, hollo!"

There was a dead silence instantly, and no one answered the hail.

Julian repeated it, for he felt sure he had recognized the voice of Alligator Ike, and instantly a flash of fire was followed by a bullet which entered the loop-hole obliquely, ricocheted off the stone, knocking the splinters into Julian's face, nearly blinding him, and effectually curing him of any further idea of hailing Alligator Ike.

The pain of one of the splinters, striking him over the left eye, forced a cry from him, and he missed his footing and fell off the ledge down the steps, when in a moment Stevens hurried down to him, saying, in a low and anxious tone:

"Are ye hurt bad?"

"Not much," answered Julian; "but I fear I'm almost blinded."

"Keep still," said Stevens in the same guarded tone. "I'll swear you're dead, and maybe they'll go off."

Then he sprang up to the ledge and called out:

"You've done it now, boys. You've killed that poor young fellow. God forgive you for it. He never did you any harm."

"Are ye sure he's dead?" cried the voice of Alligator Ike. "Are ye quite sure?"

"Of course I am. He's as dead as a door-nail," was the ready reply. "Got the bullet in his eye."

"Sarve him right," answered the voice outside. "Teach him to come pokin' down hyar, nosin' 'bout other folks' biz. Come along, boys—and—look hyar, Stevens."

"Well?" said Stevens.

"You jest keep your eyes skinned arter this fur the signal, and report your visitors as soon as they get in. If the boys hadn't seen the cuss pokin' along in the Narrows we mout never ha' known it. Good-night."

Then there was a shuffling of feet outside and Stevens observed in a cautious way to Joe:

"They're going, but it won't do to open the door. This is only a trick."

They remained at the loop-holes for a little while longer but could hear nothing, when Stevens said:

"Joe, you keep watch here. I'm going up to the lantern. How is your eye, Mr. Grey?"

"Better," said Julian rather faintly. "I thought it was on the eyeball, but it seems not. I can see a little, but I am in considerable pain."

"Stay where you are, then," said the light-keeper, and he ascended the staircase to the lantern of the light house, where he lay down on the little balcony that surrounded the glasses, and peeped over through the intervals between the planks.

He saw the scow in which the assailants had come still lying in the channel next to the land, and knew that his suspicions had been correct. The men who had attacked the light-house had not gone away.

"They're bound to cover their tracks," he groaned to himself. "Oh, if I only knew how to get that boy away."

As he looked he saw a man stalk out from under the house below and look up.

The light-keeper lay still, and presently the man was joined by several others, distinctly visible in the moonlight.

He heard them conversing in low tones, but could not catch what was said, till one who seemed to be the leader, spoke aloud:

"Go down to the scow, boys. I can't blame the Yank. He's got his duty to do, and he's done it. But we've got to watch that the young man don't get away. I don't believe he's dead. Take the boat with you and we'll go. It's no use watching here."

Stevens breathed more freely as he saw them depart, but he noted with uneasiness that one of the men pulled in Julian's boat and dragged it round the end of the island into the river channel.

A little later, and the scow put off from the shore, and vanished up the Locohatchee river, whence it had come, when the light-keeper went slowly down-stairs, and said to his followers:

"They have gone at last. We can go out."

They went out into the cabin, and found the outer door burst from its fastenings; but the cabin was otherwise uninjured.

They lighted one of the extinguished lamps, and found a few blood-tracks on the floor, but so little that old Joe observed:

"Golly, Marse Stevens, we done shoot pow'ful bad, I reckon. Hain't killed one of 'em."

"Darkness and poor rifles, with old eyes," said Stevens, rather mournfully. "We're not what we used to be, Uncle Joe."

"Dunno that," responded Joe, rather obstinately. "I don't hev to war specks yet. Reckon some of dem fellers got it, arter all. Mebbe dey'll come back to-night, cappen."

"I think not. But they know Mr. Grey's not killed. They've taken his skiff. I guess you'll be a prisoner for some time here, Mr. Grey."

Julian had been binding up his eye with a wet cloth to ease the inflammation, and he said, rather ruefully:

"I wonder why they did that. I never did them any harm."

"They think you want to discover their secret," returned Stevens, gloomily. "I thought that you might have escaped their vigilance, but it seems not."

"And what is their secret?" asked Julian.

"The secret of the smoke," returned Stevens in the same gloomy way. "I was coming to it when we were interrupted. If you want to hear it I'll tell you now, but I warn you that, after you know it, you'll be worse off than you were before."

"Never mind that," said Julian, firmly. "I begin to see there is some dark crime hid behind all this mystery. Tell me, and in some way I'll manage to ferret it out and punish the authors."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE LIGHT-KEEPER'S STORY.

THE scene in the light-house was very gloomy when Stevens began his story afresh.

Julian Grey, with a little line of blood down on the side of his face, where the stone splinter had struck him over the eye, sat with a wet bandage round his brow, his head resting on his hands, feeling as if he wished he had never come there.

Stevens looked still more gloomy, and kept a keen watch on the path leading down to the channel, with a loaded rifle lying by his hand while he spoke.

Old Joe, the coolest member of the party, was quietly engaged in cleaning and loading the guns of the others, dirty from their recent conflict, with a grim, resolute look on his face that showed he was worked up to fighting-pitch, and on his mettle to prove it.

Stevens began in a low voice.

"Joe knows all about the rest of the story. Where was I when those fellows interrupted me? Oh, yes, I remember. I was a prisoner to that incarnate devil who commands them all. Yes, you might not believe it, but it's not a difficult thing to keep up a long war for an indefinite time in the Everglades of Florida. There were only three or four hundred Indians in '38 under Osceola, but they managed to defy the whole power of the United States for eight years and massacre a battalion of our regular troops. The few hostile Seminoles might have kept up the war to this day had they not been taken by treachery at last.

"When the Florida war was over the coast was abandoned, as every one knows. There used to be a fort here, another on Indian river; now the nearest is away off on the Dry Tortugas, at the very extremity of the chain of islands that we call Florida Keys. As far as white men are concerned, the Florida Everglades are to-day as lonely as the middle of the Sahara Desert. But they have in their swampy depths a population of their own, and a dangerous one to any one who ventures in there. All the Seminoles did not go to Indian Territory. There are several families left in the interior, and besides these, there are more or less discontented spirits left from the men who were on the losing side in the late war, of whom this Alligator Ike is the leader.

"But you said that he seized you by the wrist when he got you to the side of his boat," said Julian. "What did you do then?"

"Do? What could I do? I was surprised, amazed, confounded. I admit that I knew not what to do. This man had the advantage over me. He had been watching all the time, while I was fighting the panther, entirely unseen. He had shot the beast, and so possibly saved my life, but there he sat, in full Confederate uniform, with my pistol, which he had just wrung out of my hand by main strength, in his grasp. For several minutes I was too much surprised to know what to do, and then I asked him: 'Who are you and what are you doing here?' He laughed in a sneering manner as he answered: 'I'm the Boss of the Everglades, that's who I am, Yank. They call me Alligator Ike, in your Yankee settlements on the St. John's. Now, who are you, and whar d'you come from?'"

"And what did you tell him?" asked Julian, as Stevens paused.

"I told him I was the keeper of the light-house at Jupiter Inlet, and asked him in turn what he was doing with a Confederate uniform on. He sneered more scornfully than before, and told me it was none of my business. I was his prisoner anyhow, and had no call to ask any questions. Then he let go my wrist, and told me to take my sculling oar and go ahead where he told me. Naturally I demurred, and drew my small pistol, which I still had in my belt, warning him to keep off at his peril. I began to think I had to do with a madman. Somewhat to my surprise, the fact of my having a second pistol seemed to disconcert him, and he hastily cried, 'Don't shoot, Yank; don't shoot. I'se gwine, I'se gwine.' He talked the broadest kind of cracker dialect, and pulled his dug-out away, with every sign of being terrified. No sooner had he got about a hundred yards off, however, than he turned round in his boat, ceased rowing, and cried out to me: 'Yank, try a shot with that 'ere pop of yourn. Shoot away. I give ye leave.' Of course I did no such rash thing. He was at the extreme range of my large pistol, and beyond the reach of the little one. I shook my head, and then he picked up a rifle, leveled it at me over the gunnel of his boat, and sung out: 'Chuck the pop into the water. Quick, durn ye, or I'll put a hole in ye.' My only reply was to pick up my oar, and begin to scull away, when bang went his gun, and a bullet struck the loom of the oar, knocking it out of my hand, and barely escaping my body, as it splintered the wood. Then he yelled out, 'Got any more pops, Yank? If ye have, trot 'em out. Pitch that thing into the river, and be pretty darned quick about it.' Up went his rifle, and it seemed to me to be a repeater, for he seemed to have no trouble as to its being loaded. 'Will ye drop the pop into the water or not?' he asked. 'I'll send the next ball into your gizzard, Yank, if ye don't.' I had no resource but to obey. I could not even run away. I tossed the pistol into the water, where an alligator snapped at it, thinking it food no doubt, and then Alligator Ike roared out: 'Got any more pops, Yank?' 'No,' I told him. 'I'm unarmed now.' Then he rowed up to where I stood in the stern of my skiff, took hold of the boat's painter, tied it to his own craft, and began to row away. Presently we passed where my broken oar lay in the water, and he told me to pick it up and scull the best I could, to help him. Of course I could only obey.

The oar was not much damaged, a hole having been bored through the thickest part of the loom, and it was still fit for service, so I helped him as requested, the labor requiring me to turn my back on him. This brought my face toward the belt of Cedar Swamp, and I perceived what I had not known before, that we had come near an opening in the barrier and that a large sheet of water lay beyond, out of which I saw the dense black smoke rising plainly. I began to feel excited. I was turning away from the very place I had come to see, and instinctively I turned to Alligator Ike and asked: 'What is that?'"

"And did he answer?" exclaimed Julian.

"Answer? Yes, after a singular fashion of his own, however. He stopped rowing, picked up his rifle, which I now saw to be a good Winchester, of the latest pattern, and told me with a savage oath to 'go on sculling and hold my cussed tongue.' He cocked his rifle as he spoke, and looked so wicked that again I had no choice, but to obey orders, and I sculled away, very soon losing sight altogether of the opening in the cedar swamp, and the smoke I had come so far to investigate.

"Pretty soon I noticed that we were coming to a stream in the Everglade, from the blackness of the water and the abundance of alligators. The current was one of unusual swift ness for that part of the country, flowing at nearly three miles an hour and here my conductor drew in his oars and said to me, 'Look a hyar, Yank, I don't hunger arter killin' you, but I reckon the best thing I kin do is to make you jump in hyar and let the alligators eat ye.' Well, I tried my best to smile, and told him that I didn't propose to jump in, for any one. 'If I'm to be killed,' I said, 'I propose to make you into a full-fledged cowardly murderer. You shall not lay it on the alligators.' He gave me a grim sort of a smile, and told me he didn't mind that a bit. 'I'd jest as lieve done shoot ye, Yank. I'm only a-thinkin' of the light-house.' 'Yes, the light-house,' I said starting, for I had nearly forgotten it. 'Joe won't know what's become of me all this time, and the light may go out. For God's sake, man, remember that my death may cause the wreck of many a ship.' He nodded. 'Ay, ay,' he told me; 'that's what I'm thinking of. I don't want the pore cusses to go ashore. Look a hyar, Yank, what brought you hyar? What did ye come fur?' I told him curiosity to find the origin of the black smoke to be seen from Jupiter Light. He scowled at me. 'I thought so,' he said. 'I thought as much, and I reckon I'd better shoot ye now, so ye won't come nosin' round no more arter other folks' biz.' 'Very well,' I said. 'You have my life in your hands. Shoot away and God forgive you for murder.' The idea seemed to strike him unfavorably, for he lowered his gun. 'I told ye I don't want to kill ye,' he said to me; 'but I don't want ye hyar no more.' 'You needn't be afraid I'll come,' I retorted bitterly. 'I'm a cripple but not a fool.' Then he seemed to hesitate and finally asked me if I'd swear to keep my adventures to myself and come no more to hunt for the mystery of the smoke. He gave me a choice finally to swear or die, and I swore, to save my life. All this time we had been floating down the current of the black river, and when he had finished swearing me I found we had drifted down into the midst of a dense cedar swamp in which the stream became visible between low banks that showed the ground was slowly rising toward the sea. As soon as I had sworn never to enter the Everglades again on my quest, Alligator Ike took everything out of my boat but the steering-oar, and told me to go along, and, when I got to the sea, to make my way to the east till I saw the light. Then he took to his oars and rowed away from me up-stream. He had a very sharply modeled boat of the canoe shape, hollowed out of a single log and polished till it shone again and he rowed rapidly till he turned a bend of the stream and was out of sight. As for me, I had to do my best sculling down the black stream and make all the noise I could, on account of the alligators, which fairly swarmed in the water, as the stream advanced into the depths of the swamp. Finally, when it grew near sunset and I was just about tired out, I met the tide rolling up the black stream, and knew that I was safe from alligators. They all darted away as soon as the first wave of salt water neared them, and I tied up to a branch of a tree till the tide slackened a bit. To cut a long story short, I reached the coast next morning, and finally made my way back to Jupiter Light, where I have remained ever since, cured of my passion for roaming alone."

"And have you never discovered the mystery of the smoke?" asked Julian eagerly.

"No more than I have told you. I saw it rise directly out of the bosom of some great lake inland, and I saw that it rose from a low black mound like the cone of a volcano, but that was all."

"And have you never seen anything of this Alligator Ike till to-day?"

Stevens shook his head.

"I wish I could say I had not. I would be a happy man to-day if I had not. But since that time I have never been free from his presence and he has never come but to harm me."

CHAPTER XV.

A REIGN OF TERROR.

"THEN he came again, after you had returned to the light-house?" asked Julian.

"He did, the very next day after I was back. I had not dreamed he would. I was telling Joe what had happened to me, and we were sitting in the cabin, when I saw him coming up the path from the creek, no longer in the Confederate general's dress, but clad in butternut-brown and carrying a long, old-fashioned rifle. In those days we were quite unarmed, Joe and I. We had had no reason to fear any one, and no occasion to use arms except my two pistols. Joe used to be sergeant in my company, when I was in the colored troops, but he was no better off than I. He had brought along his old Springfield muzzle-loading rifle when he was discharged, but it had stood in a corner so long that it was not fit for use, and we were perfectly defenseless when Alligator Ike walked up to our door and bailed Joe: 'Hello, you nigger, come hyar.' He spoke in the bullying tone of the old slave-drivers, and Joe, who had outlived his old terror of the lash, retorted: 'You come hyar, yourself. I ain't no nigger, sab.' I thought the answer seemed rather to please the white man, for he laughed without any ill-nature and swore he 'liked the nigger's spunk.' But at the same time he put a whistle to his lips and sounded three sharp puffs, when out of the bushes from the creek beyond came nearly a score of men in the old butternut-brown I had not seen for nearly twenty years, and they shoved out a scow and poled their way over to Jupiter Island, while Alligator Ike stood there leaning on his old rifle, a very different weapon from that he had used in the swamps. I did not know what was coming. I was quite powerless to prevent it if I had. The light-house was not fortified in any way. The end of it was that these men came up to me, and then I discovered that they were all disguised so that it was impossible to recognize any one of them. Then, for the first time, I began to suspect what was coming. I had heard distant rumors of kukluxing, but had never seen any of its effects in Florida. These men were disguised, and every one had a brace of revolvers in his belt and a rifle or shot-gun."

"And what did they do?" asked Julian, as Stevens paused, seemingly unwilling to continue.

The face of the light-keeper darkened.

"They took poor Joe there, without a word of warning, tied him up and beat him severely, as Alligator Ike told us, 'to teach him to be civil to a white man in future.' Joe never uttered a cry. It was useless to resist. They then took me and told me I should have the same dose if ever I tried to penetrate the secret of the swamp smoke. Furthermore, they made us swear never to complain of our treatment, and to do our best to keep away all visitors from the light-house. I promised readily enough, but of course with a mental protest that it was done under compulsion, and in no sense obligatory. When they had secured that promise they went away, and Joe and I were left alone to digest our treatment as best we could."

"And did you not write to head-quarters and report all this?" asked Julian.

Stevens shook his head.

"I thought of that, but we had no means of sending a letter. Jupiter Light is only visited once a year by the supply-ship, and it was eleven months to the time when we expected it again. Vessels never stop here. It is to keep them off the coast that the light is kept burning. We could only wait. If I had a letter to send I must take it myself, and the nearest place where there was a post-office was St. Augustine. Finally I determined to leave the light-house and go to St. Augustine alone to report what had happened. I stole off in my skiff one night, and the next morning I was stopped on Indian river by a scout, who fired a shot across the bow of my boat and ordered me back. When I sculled on, trying to escape, he disappeared in the bushes, and I thought he had given it up. Half an hour later a dug-out made its appearance, with three men in it, and I was headed back and forced to return here. Then they came down on me and took away my skiff, so that Joe and I were kept here for the rest of the year, unable to get away. A week before the coming of the supply-ship I was visited again, this time by Alligator Ike and three men, who brought back my skiff and told me I had my liberty on condition I reported nothing of what had happened. Of course I promised anything, and of course when the supply-ship came I broke my word and made a full report of all that had been done to us two, hoping for protection from the Government, and the clearing out of this nest of desperadoes."

"And what was the result?" asked Julian.

Stevens ground his teeth.

"Alligator Ike is no common man. Who or what he is I know not, but he seems to have influence at head quarters, and to have told his story before I told mine. You may remember I said that I had received a wound in the head during the war. When I reported to the commander of the supply-ship the existence of this

gang of cut-throats, he smiled in a very significant manner, and told me that he had heard of my case before, and recommended me not to press my complaint on the notice of the department, as it was important to the safety of navigation that light-keepers should be discreet persons, with all their wits about them. I did not at first understand him, but it soon flashed on me what was the matter. The report had been set into circulation that my mind was affected by my head wound, and I was finally told confidentially, by one of my friends on the ship, that if I persisted in pressing my complaint it would be looked on as evidence of unsound mind, and that I should lose my place. They would not listen to a word on the subject, regarding my whole story as a figment of the imagination."

"But could you not prove it to them?" asked Julian, incredulously. "Joe's scars, for instance, would prove it. Joe's word would corroborate your story."

"I thought of that; but it was no use."

"Why?"

"When they beat Joe it was with a flat paddle, which produces great torture but leaves no marks behind it that last over a week or two."

"But Joe could tell his story."

"He tried to; but they wouldn't listen to it. It seemed as if the officer were in collusion with the gang in some mysterious way. At all events, the ship left her supplies and sailed away, the officer in charge declining to take my written affidavit with him. The sails of the ship were not yet hidden under the sea when I received a third visit from Alligator Ike, with six of his men, who came out of the swamp, landed here, seized Joe and myself, tied us up and beat us both so severely that I became senseless from the torture. When I came to I was solemnly warned by them that any further attempt to interfere with them or complain would be met with the same fate and punishment."

Julian shuddered slightly.

"Heavens! what merciless wretches!"

"You may well say that, but they overshot their mark this time."

"How? Why?"

"They roused in me what they had not yet done, the Yankee keenness that will move heaven and earth to have its own way. Joe and I grew cunning. We pretended to submit, and waited till their suspicions were lulled. Then, one night, we got into the skiff and sailed out to sea, resolved to drown rather than to submit to further degradation. We found a coaster going to Savannah, and she picked us up. On our arrival there I reported at once, and as we were still marked with the blows of the paddles, a revenue cutter was sent down here to investigate."

"And surely that made the discovery," put in Julian, eagerly.

"You do not know red tape. Some prejudice seemed to exist in the minds of all the officers that heard our story. The commander of the cutter came back, it was true, to the light-house with me, and sent boats up the Locohatchee to find, as he said, whether these terrible villains really existed or not. The boats went up and the crews saw no one. They returned and reported the country uninhabited and uninhabitable. What do you suppose was the result?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"Joe and I were accused of *beating each other*, of trumping up the whole story and I received a sharp letter from head-quarters, warning me that if any further complaints were made about me, I should be dismissed the service. Since that day, Joe and I have never seen a Northern man till you dropped in on us; and now the question remains, how shall we get you off to sea as a witness, on whom no suspicion can be cast? If we can do that once, I may yet see my trials avenged on these villains."

Julian had become very thoughtful as Stevens finished his story. But for the ocular evidence he had had of the existence of the foe, he felt that he might have taken sides with the Government officers in believing Stevens insane, or at least a monomaniac. His story seemed to be incredible in the nineteenth century.

"How did you manage to fortify the light-house as you have it now?" he asked at last.

"By slow degrees and after several years. We had to do it when our watchers were away, and under the pretense of making things more comfortable. As you notice, most of our material comes from ships that have been wrecked on the outer reef in some of the spring and autumn gales. Joe and I have done all the building, and have made the outer cabin strong enough to resist ordinary assaults, while the inner door, as you have seen, is fit to defy anything but artillery."

"But how did you make it?"

"Out of boiler iron, bit by bit, in secret, on the side away from the channel, till we got it hung. The weapons and ammunition came from a schooner going to join the Cuban rebels, and wrecked near here. It was after getting what we could from her that we discovered what is the principal occupation of Alligator Ike and his gang of desperadoes."

"And that is—"

"Robbing wrecks and murdering the poor folks who come ashore, rescued from the sea. It's an old trade on the coast of Florida; and it has been carried to a system that has never been so great as now. We were nearly caught on one of our expeditions, but escaped in time."

"And what do the Government officers think of this—your fortification?"

"They laugh about it, and regard it as a fresh proof of insanity on my part. Nothing will make them see the truth but the independent witness of a stranger like you. That is why the desperadoes are determined to kill you."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE HURRICANE.

WHEN Stevens had finished his story it was past midnight, and the three denizens of the light-house retired to rest behind the iron door and slept a fitful and uneasy sleep on the steps, afraid to remain outside for fear of a visit of their persecutors during the night.

When morning came they ascended to the lantern, put out the lamp and surveyed the neighborhood with all the care possible, not discovering the remotest trace of their nocturnal visitors.

"They never come in the daytime," remarked Stevens, when Julian noted the fact. "A stranger might pass here over and over again, and never suspect that he was watched; but it will not do to trust to being unseen. They have scouts and spies, as I believe, on every point, and are keenly watching the coast all the time."

Julian went out and traversed the little bluff of coquina rock on which the light-house was built, without finding any trace of his late foes. But for the absence of his boat, he might have thought that he had dreamed of the assault; but the absence of his little craft and the cut over his eye convinced him that the episode had been a real one. Moreover, the outer door of the cabin still stood, half open, where it had been wrenched from its hinges, and there were the prints of coarse boots in the sand. But as far as he could see the swamps of the Locohatchee were entirely empty of any sort of its inhabitants, and after a thorough exploration of the whole island he returned, to breakfast on the huge jew-fish, remarking to Stevens:

"There must be some way of leaving this place. If we can do nothing else we can build a canoe and I'll sail away in that."

"Build a canoe?" echoed Stevens. "We've nothing to build it with, boy."

Julian laughed as he answered proudly:

"I'm a member of the canoe club, and we make canoes out of anything. You have the sails of a schooner lying on the rocks out by the foot of the light-house."

"Yes. She went ashore a year ago, and we saved her mainsail to make an awning."

"We'll make a canoe out of that. You've plenty of paint, haven't you?"

"Certainly. We've stores of it to keep the woodwork of the light-house looking decent."

"Then we'll make a canoe," said Julian, decidedly. "I'll show you how very soon. I've made up my mind those fellows shall not beat us."

"Then we must work in the daytime, and hide our canoe in the light-house," said Stevens.

"That is just what we will do," said Julian.

They had tools in plenty, and the two keepers had become expert carpenters during their long, lonely probation at Jupiter Inlet. Driftwood was plenty, and long before night they had put together the framework of a canoe, that only needed to be covered with canvas and painted to be a very pretty boat.

They carried it into the light-house, and slept by it all night, not being disturbed by any more visitors.

When morning came, Julian climbed into the lantern of the light-house to look over the landscape, and was struck the moment he turned inland, by seeing what he had not noticed the day before, a dense, black volume of smoke rising on the western horizon, far beyond the swamps of Locohatchee, and to all seeming emerging from the bowels of the earth in intermittent puffs.

It was the mysterious smoke of which he had been told by Stevens, and he wondered he had not seen it the day before.

When the light-keeper came up to attend to his duties, Julian called his attention to the smoke.

Stevens nodded his head gloomily.

"Ay, ay," he said, "we'll have a storm by to-morrow night. I thought so from the sky."

Julian looked round him.

"What's the matter with the sky? It looks as clear as if it never stormed here."

"Yes, so it looks; but you don't know the coast of Florida as I do. How's the wind?"

Julian looked at the smoke.

"It seems to be northwest."

"Look to the southeast then."

"Well, what of it? All's clear."

"Not quite. Do you not see some faint lines of vapor stretching across the direction of the surface wind?"

Julian looked.

He could hardly distinguish the lines spoken of by his companion on account of the glare of the sun, but managed to make out some very faint filmy threads drawn across the sky in the extreme southeast, and resting on a white, hazy ribbon on the edge of the horizon.

"Well," he said at last, "I see what you mean; but what of it?"

"Only this: a heavy storm is coming on; it may be from Cuba, or it may be from the Gulf. In either case it is going to be a violent one. We don't have many storms in Florida; but what we do have are terrible ones. The hurricanes of the tropics blow themselves out here."

"But what has that to do with the smoke out in the Everglades?"

"Only this: I've noticed that whenever a storm is coming on that smoke is thickest, and we are always left alone for at least a week."

Julian's face lighted up.

"Left alone? Then I can get off, perhaps?"

"Don't count on that," returned Stevens in the same gloomy manner. "They won't watch us, to be sure, but the storm will do it for them. You'll not be able to get out of here till the calm weather sets in again, and by that time the watchers will be back."

Julian set his teeth determinately.

"I'll get out somehow. You don't know me, Stevens, and in fact I'm not sure if I know myself fully; but I feel as if I had all my father's spirit in me. He was a colonel of cavalry in the war, and said to be a brave officer. Be sure I'll not disgrace him. But what, think you, is the connection between the thickening of the smoke and the coming on of the storm?"

Stevens hesitated.

"Frankly I don't know, but I suspect."

"What do you suspect then?"

"I suspect the smoke to be a signal of some kind to the wreckers all along the coast."

"But you say it rises constantly?"

"Yes, but not so thickly as before a storm, and dies away after it."

"Very well," said Julian. "Let's hurry down now and get to work at that canoe. I'm going off somehow or other, before that gang of wreckers comes back here."

He went down stairs with Stevens, and they worked hard at the canoe.

It was a very simply constructed craft, very much resembling an Esquimaux *kayak* or fishing canoe, made of a frame of light wood, covered with canvas stretched tight, so that it was very rapidly and cheaply made.

They had the skin stretched before night, two of them working together; while old Joe was laboriously whittling a double-bladed paddle out of a stick of timber.

They drew it into the light-house, and Stevens remarked, with a look out to seaward:

"The storm's coming, sure enough. Look out yonder."

Away off to the southeast, a dark haze was brooding over the sea, and the same haze was spread in streaks over the sky, making a large ring round the risen moon, which was within four days of the full.

A deep moaning sound could be heard in the mangroves along the shore of the inlet, and the surf rumbled with a deep menacing roar that began to make talking outside the house a matter requiring some exertion of voice.

"We're safe enough from visitors now," said Stevens pointing to the shore. "There's no sort of shelter after once you get past the coast bluffs, and I've seen quite a heavy sea rolled in on those Everglades, stirring up the mud from the very bottom. It's not without reason that those fellows leave here in a storm."

"Then we can sleep in the cabin?" said Julian inquiringly, to which Stevens replied:

"Certainly. They'll never venture here."

That night accordingly they enjoyed the first tranquil refreshing slumber they had known since Julian came to the light-house, though, true to the keeper's prediction, a furious storm came on during the night, beating on the roof in sheets of rain and eddying round the stone walls in tremendous gusts.

But the cabin at the foot of the light-house was too strongly built to be damaged even by such a tempest, blowing at the rate of sixty miles an hour.

The solid stone wall never quivered, and the little bull's-eye windows kept out the rain perfectly, while the door had been fastened up too securely to allow that to give way.

When morning dawned the sky was a mass of black clouds, driving rapidly from northeast to southwest, the wind below coming from due east, and Stevens observed:

"We're coming to the center of what the weather sharps call a cyclone, and it's going to be a bad one. If you want to see what the wind can do, go up into the lantern and look over the land."

Julian did as he was directed and was perfectly appalled by the picture of destruction.

The whole face of the Everglade that looked so lovely the day before, with its glittering lakes and green islands, was now a dreary waste of gray mud, with trees blown flat on all sides, or bowed over toward the water, with their branches streaming straight out.

Every trace of beauty was gone from the scene, vanished in a horrid waste of gray desolation.

But serene amid all the desolation, not so much as quivering under the furious gusts that swept round it, stood Jupiter Inlet Light-house, built of solid stone, locked together with iron clamps, the iron lantern on the top just quivering faintly when the gusts were most furious, but feeling so strong that involuntarily Julian felt his spirits rising as he looked all round him in the war of the elements, and realized that he was in a place meant to defy the hurricane and capable of doing it.

He remained in the lantern, fascinated by the grand spectacle of the storm, for more than an hour, gazing up and down the coast.

His vision was limited by the driving storm scud, but he could see that a tremendous surf was rolling in on the shore of the reefs outside, while the waters of Indian river and the inlet were covered with little white caps, though sheltered from the violence of the storm by the reef of coral that barred out the furious Atlantic.

He watched them for some time, and made up his mind that it was possible for a canoe to live in the sea that was running inside the reefs, when he noticed in one place a breach in the sand-bar, through which the sea was pouring in such lofty waves that he saw a portion of the bar must have been washed away.

From that moment a passage became impossible in any craft known, and he was content to wait till the storm might subside, satisfied that at least the light-house would not blow down.

He went down to the cabin, and they spent the rest of the day in painting over the canoe and making it thoroughly water-tight.

The second night was marked by an increase in violence of the storm, the wind shifting to the southwest, accompanied by tremendous lightning and thunder, with heavier rain than before, mingled with hail.

Even Stevens and old Joe looked grave and apprehensive, and the light-keeper put all the rifles by the door and went away from them up the light-house stairs.

In the middle of the night they heard the sound of guns not far off, just as the thunder began to abate, and Stevens cried out:

"A wreck! a wreck! God help the poor creatures to-night."

They hurried up to the lantern to peer abroad, and by getting behind the reflector could catch a glimpse of the sea, right below them, rolling up to the very foot of the light-house. Very dark and angry it looked, speckled with white foam, and the flash of the powerful light fell on a large ship about a mile off that had gone ashore, and lay over on her side with the sea making a clean breach over her.

Stevens brought out the telescope, turned the glare of the lantern full on the wreck, stopped the machinery and watched attentively.

Presently he handed the glass to Julian, saying:

"Your eyes are younger than mine. Tell me what you see."

Julian took the glass and gazed at the wreck. The light concentrated by the powerful reflectors, shone full on the scene, and the telescope being directed out of a complete shadow, revealed the scene with surprising clearness.

The vessel that had struck seemed to be a large three-masted schooner, all of her spars still standing, the hull bumping up and down in a way that showed the tide must be rising.

But what struck the young man's attention most was the fact that, on the white line of beach by the sea, some one had kindled a fire, around which a number of dark figures had clustered, and that, between these and the ship, men were running back and forth.

He turned to Stevens to say:

"They seem to be trying to save the crew of the ship. Who are they?"

Stevens shook his head.

"Not one will be saved. Those are the pirate wreckers of the Everglade and Key."

CHAPTER XVII. THE WRECKERS.

FOR some time the young man watched, as if fascinated, the movements of the wreckers in the midst of that fearful storm.

He had not believed it possible, after Stevens's story, that the wreckers would come out so openly near the light-house to practice their nefarious profession, but there was no denying the evidence of his senses.

Men were grouped on the beach by the wreck, come from no one knew where, and through the glass he could perceive that they were not at all engaged in saving lives.

The telescope through which he looked was a very powerful one, and he could distinctly see figures and actions.

He saw a rope stretched between the wreck and the shore, saw men coming along it and saw them knocked down as soon as they got to the shore, while the wreckers carried off everything they could lay their hands on.

He saw a struggle in one case between one of the sailors that had come ashore and the wreckers, in which the poor fellow was felled with a

club as coolly as if he had been an ox under the hands of the butcher.

Stevens allowed him to look till he was tired and said quietly:

"I'm glad you're here, Grey. They can't say that you're crazy too. You've seen it with your own eyes. These men live on wrecks, and where they take their plunder no one knows, though I suspect strongly that in the secret will be found the secret of the smoke. When the storm clears up you will find no vestige of that wreck. It will first be broken up by the sea; then by the wreckers. We can do nothing to help them. Let us go down. It's harrowing to watch wickedness one can't prevent."

They went down-stairs to the cabin and tried to sleep, but it was long before slumber visited the eyelids of Julian Grey. He dreamed all sorts of horrible things when he at last dropped off and woke up all in a cold sweat, thinking that some one was holding an ax over his head. There was indeed some one there, but it was only old Joe, who was saying, cheerfully:

"Wake up, Marse Grey; de storm done gone and de sun shining."

Julian started up and saw that the black spoke the truth, for a bright shaft of sunlight lay on the wall opposite them, coming in through one of the bull's-eye holes.

He had lain down in his clothes, and was soon up and outside the cabin, where he saw that the storm had indeed cleared away, to be replaced by a stiff gale from the west, that felt cool and refreshing after the stifling heat of the shut-up light-house.

White clouds were scudding rapidly over the sky, the sea was still rough, but going down with rapidity, and a few sails could be seen on the distant eastern horizon.

Julian called to Stevens:

"Now's my time to get off, if I'm ever to do it. The canoe's good enough to live in this sea, I think. I'll take something to eat, and put off at once while I can."

The light-keeper looked at the tumbling sea with some distrust.

"I'm afraid you can't do it," he said. "You don't realize what a sea's running, and that little cockle-shell can't live in it."

"You don't know the canoe," returned Julian, confidently. "It's the safest craft floating. I shall not ship a drop of water."

He hurriedly ate some breakfast, and then they brought out the little canoe, so light that one man could easily carry it.

They took it down to the water and launched it in the inside channel, when they found that it behaved admirably, and that old Joe's paddle was all that could be expected.

Then Julian put in his Winchester rifle and a pouch of ammunition, took some provisions from the light house, and a flask of whisky, on which Stevens insisted as a necessity in Florida, and paddled boldly round the edge of the island into the inlet, to face the open sea.

He knew that a canoe, decked at either end, with only a well-hole in the middle, and a cover to that, fastened round the paddler's waist, is one of the dryest crafts to be found, and he had no fears of the waves.

Still, when he got out into the inlet and found that they were running about four feet high, he could not avoid confessing that he had underrated them.

A wave four feet high is a trifle to a ship, and nothing unpleasant to a yacht, but to a canoe that only rises about ten inches from the water's edge it is a serious matter. Every time he got into the trough, the crests curled above his head and cut off his view of land and sea, while the further he went the higher grew the billows.

Pretty soon he realized the reason of this. The tide was rising against the wind, and the conflict produced a great commotion. Within an hour from the time he left the light-house he was completely exhausted by paddling against a current running six miles an hour, and found himself driven back into the inlet and swept along by the tide, he could hardly tell whither.

He found it out in a little while, when he gave himself up to the current, and was swept along at race-horse speed inland.

Very soon after, he saw the dark-green foliage of the mangroves ahead, and realized that he was being swept into the mouth of the Locohatchee river.

Then he straightened up, and the idea came into his head as he swept along:

"The fates are against my going to sea, but I may be able to escape over the Everglade."

He knew that in his light canoe he could paddle away from any scow or skiff, and did not doubt his ability to pass a dug-out canoe.

At all events he could not get out to sea, and he flattered himself that his foes would not be on the watch, immediately after the storm.

Within a half-hour after he had given way to the current, he found himself driving up the little river, with a rapidity that amazed him.

He had not calculated on the force acquired by a tide going up a narrow stream, and on the power lent to the tide by the Gulf Stream, which washes the shores of Florida.

He found himself in a great wave of blue water that went shooting up the stream at the rate of ten miles an hour, and, once he was on it, it required but a few vigorous strokes of the paddle to maintain his place on the advancing wave.

The trees at the border seemed to fleet by him as in a panorama, and on he went, hour after hour, with a swift freedom that was perfectly delightful.

He remembered that he had heard how the tides in Florida sweep within fifty miles of the center of the peninsula, and realized that he had come in on the first of the flood.

Nothing seemed to impede him.

The hurricane had packed the waters up over the Everglades, so that the Locohatchee had disappeared in a waste of waters, amid which the trees were submerged to their lower branches.

Only the invisible barrier of the channel below guided the tide as it swept onward, and he could trace the blue water in the midst of the grayish-brown muddy lake that covered the whole face of the country.

He saw no trace of human presence as he flitted along over the submerged forest, and the river was free from alligators, the beasts having fled before the influx of the salt water.

He began to feel a sense of strange exhilaration in the loneliness, and had no apprehension but what he would be able to take care of himself. He was young and vigorous, with all his limbs, not a cripple like poor Stevens, and he possessed another advantage in knowing his danger, and not being liable to be taken by surprise.

He had been under fire in the light-house, and felt that he did not fear bullets, while he knew himself to be a good shot, with a first-class rifle. Very soon, therefore, finding that the water had become perfectly smooth as he went inland, so that he was no longer in danger of being swamped, he withdrew his well-cover, and got his rifle ready for use at a moment's notice, in case he should meet any of Alligator Ike's friends.

But hour after hour passed on, and the river was as lonely as ever, till the sun had risen to the zenith, when the wind began to slacken and die away, and Julian realized that the tide was turning once more to ebb.

Then he glanced around him to see where he was, and paddled his canoe out of the current of the river into the browner waters that covered the whole face of the Everglade.

He saw before him, wherever he looked, trees in clumps and belts, with the water up to their lower branches.

The country was completely submerged, and he could penetrate the cypress swamps with ease as long as the water lasted at its present height. But would it last?

That was a serious question for him; for on it depended his freedom of locomotion.

Moreover, he was quite uncertain where he was, except that he had been coming to the west and north since he swept by the light-house, and that from the rapidity of the current he must have been swept at least thirty-five or forty miles into the interior.

"Forty miles!"

He muttered the last words to himself.

"Forty miles! Why, that's as far as Stevens said it was to Lake Okeechobee. I must be near it. It may be only a mile off."

As the thought crossed his mind he took out his pocket compass and looked to the west.

On that side lay a dense belt of forest, chiefly composed of the solemn cypress, draped with Spanish moss.

The trees had suffered severely in the storm, and the masses of gray moss that had been torn off by the power of the wind, lay piled on the face of the water underneath, floating slowly out with the ebbing tide.

To the north the country was open for a long distance, looking like a lake bordered with trees.

To the south the same lake opened, studded with clusters of islands, like the country from which he had just come.

But nowhere could he see any sign of the black smoke for which he was looking, and he reasoned with himself that it could only be in one direction, behind the screen of cypress wood in front of him.

"It must be the same which Stevens saw," he said to himself, "only I have come up quicker than he did, owing to the flood tide and storm. I'll go through it, bit or miss."

He had all sorts of little conveniences in the canoe, and among others a ball of string to tie up or repair rents in the canoe.

Tying a knife to the string, he sounded, and found that he was in twelve feet of water, with a bottom so clean that the knife brought no mud clinging to it.

That point settled, he no longer felt uneasy about being left high and dry, and he boldly paddled toward the submerged cypress swamp.

He had noted a great scarcity of game as he came along in the canoe.

Animals there were none visible, and the birds seemed to have all flown away.

Now he saw them beginning to come back

in flocks from the west, and realized that they had taken shelter from the storm behind the cypress belt.

As he neared this, he perceived that all the wildcats and panthers in Florida seemed to have taken refuge among the branches, while the black bears looked as common as sheep, and he felt impelled to give the forest a wide berth instead of going through it as he had meant to do at first.

The floods had driven every creature that could climb to the trees, but what had become of the deer and hares and such like? They could not climb trees, yet he had seen no dead bodies.

Revolving the matter in his mind, he kept on skirting the edge of the timber, keeping a sharp lookout all the time.

He felt that he was coming to the very place where Alligator Ike had surprised Stevens, and he knew enough of the danger he incurred in running into the secret haunts of the pirates, to make him very cautious. He paddled in, close to the edge of the cypress belt, and stole cautiously along, watching every suspicious movement, till he became convinced that he was the only occupant of the solitude except the wild beasts of the forest.

The panthers and bears came down and stared at him as if they had never seen a white canoe before, and he could see far back in the swamp some ground rising out of the water, that seemed to be full of deer.

On he went, hour after hour, finding by the compass that he was traveling due south, when he saw, ahead of him, what he judged to be an opening in the cypress swamp.

"Perhaps it is the same through which Stevens saw the smoke," he thought, and with that his heart beat high with excitement, and he stole onward more slowly, glancing round him as he proceeded, his rifle ready for immediate use. At last he came to the gap and looked through. There lay a broad sheet of water glittering in the rays of the afternoon sun, and a great black column of smoke rose out of its bosom in great puffs. But that was not all. A man in a dug-out was fishing; not fifty feet from Julian Grey.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SECRET LAKE.

THE man in the dug-out had his back to Julian Grey, and he was lying in the stern of his little vessel, with a long rod tilted in the air, a broad palmetto hat drawn over his eyes, while the muzzle of a gun stuck out over the stern of the dug-out, behind his back.

Very softly Julian dipped in his paddle and receded behind a screen of cypress-wood, before he ventured to look any closer.

The man had the appearance of an ordinary Florida "cracker," in butternut-brown clothing; but Julian suspected him at once for a foe. What was the man doing there, in the midst of the only opening in the cedar-bush for miles, in an anchored dug-out?

His fishing was a mere pretense to while away the time, for Julian was convinced from his attitude that he was very nearly asleep, if not entirely so.

The explorer glanced in every direction, but saw no other sign of life, outside of the forest.

A brown panther, was eying him hungrily from the limb of a tree, as if the beast were waiting for him to come under the branch, but he had no inclination that way.

He had caught a glimpse of the black smoke in puffs, but that was all.

He hesitated as to how to proceed. Should he boldly arouse the sleeping man or not? It depended on whether he was asleep.

Softly he paddled past the tree where the panther lay crouching on the branch, and the creature followed from tree to tree, in a manner that showed it was not in the least fear of man.

The panther's boldness set Julian to thinking. It was not in the habit of being fired at, or it would have been more cautious. The inhabitants of the Everglade, whoever they were, encouraged the beasts of prey.

The alligators on the other hand, as he had ascertained during the day, were very wary and timid. He had come across several, and they all shot away at great speed at sight of the canoe.

He recalled the name of the chief of the band, as he believed him to be—Alligator Ike—and wondered whether this might not have a connection with the scarcity of the saurians in the Everglade.

They at least were hunted vigorously, and he knew enough of Florida to be aware that their skins were an article of commerce of considerable value.

It might be that these men, whoever they were, were only peaceable alligator-hunters, jealous of their preserves of game, and driving away every intruder. It might be that Stevens, after all, was unsound in his mind, and had imagined much of what he asserted to be the piratical practices of Alligator Ike and his band.

Anyway, suddenly Julian made up his mind that he would go up to the sleeping fisherman and

penetrate the mystery. He had decoyed the panther some distance away from the opening, and he resolved on a bold stroke.

Keeping his eye fixed on the beast, he urged his canoe close to the tree on which it lay crouched.

As he came closer the panther quivered all over, and at last, as he had expected, sprung for the canoe.

An active twist of the paddle, and the creature fell into the water, just missing the canoe, when Julian swept away his light craft, keeping out of the animal's reach, but decoying it on into deep water, and keeping his eye on the forest meanwhile.

He had noticed a stream some little way off full of alligators, and for this he made his way, the panther following with a grim persistence that amazed him.

Once in the stream, which he knew by the dark water, he saw the great lizards shooting off in fear at the white canoe, but noticed that they hesitated at sight of the panther, and swam round behind the canoe, following the beast.

The great cat very soon seemed to recognize the fact that the hunter was being hunted, turned round in the water, and began to swim back toward the cedars.

As soon as this happened Julian increased his distance rapidly, and very soon what he had expected happened.

He saw the water suddenly lashed into a great commotion; the heads of four or five alligators made their appearance close to the panther, and in less than a minute it was seized and torn to pieces before his eyes, when the alligators sunk back into the deep water and not one could be seen any more.

The same creatures that devoured beasts of prey were afraid of a canvas canoe that they could have destroyed in a moment.

"They have been hunted in canoes," he said to himself, "and they think I'm after them."

He paddled back toward the belt of cedar swamp, coasted rapidly to the end, keeping a wary lookout for more panthers, and finally ran his canoe into the midst of the trees, in perfect silence, and had the pleasure of seeing the slumbering fisherman, still in the same place.

He watched him and his boat attentively, and then looked beyond the fisherman.

He saw a broad, placid sheet of water that did not seem to have any bound to the westward, where the sun was rapidly nearing the horizon.

To the north and south it seemed to be quite shut in with belts of cedar swamp, but to the west the horizon was clear.

And in the midst of this lake he saw a low, dark, rounded cone, from the top of which issued the black smoke which had brought him there.

It rose in intermittent puffs of enormous volume, straight up in the air to a great height, and then spread out into a cloud in all directions, showing that a dead calm prevailed.

But that was all he could see of it. Whether it was a volcano or not he could not at that distance determine.

It looked like one, but he could not be sure. He urged his canoe through the cedar belt, between the trees, till he came to the other side and had a clearer view.

Then he noticed, what he had not seen before, that the lake before him was studded with islands of a character different from anything he had seen in the Everglades.

They were generally bluffs of coquina rock, standing thirty or forty feet from the level of the water, and not mere mud-banks.

Orange trees and palms crowned most of them, while oaks and maples grew on others.

While he was thinking over what could be the cause of this difference of formation, he was struck by the sight of a canoe moving round the base of one of the islands, and immediately drew back under a cedar, where he was completely sheltered by the drooping curtain of Spanish moss from observation.

From his covert he watched the canoe come up, and saw that it was a dug-out, hewn from a single log.

The bow was pointed, the stern square, like a ducking-skiff, and altogether it was a rude sort of craft, and a slow traveler.

It was propelled by a single man, dressed in the universal butternut-brown, with a broad palmetto hat on his head.

Julian lay still, for he saw that the dug-out was nearing the fisherman, and hoped to hear some conversation between the two men.

He was not disappointed, for as the further boat rowed up, with a great rumbling of oars in the row-locks, the fisherman yawned, stretched himself, and sat up in his boat, saying audibly:

"Wal, I sw'a I b'lieve I war snoozin'. It's right lucky the in'ral ain't raound."

He rubbed his eyes, settled his hat, and pulled up his line as the other man came up.

"Hello, Jake," called out the new-comer; "what luck to-day?"

"Nary bite," responded Jake, gravely. "I b'lieve that cussed harrykin's druv all the fish out of Okeechobee or killed 'em dead."

The other man grinned.

"Reckon you done gone to sleep, Jake. Look

at yer hook. The fish has ate it all as clean as a whistle."

Jake inspected his hook with the same gravity that characterizes all the proceedings of a Southerner and responded solemnly:

"You think you knows a heap, Jackson Gardner. Hit warn't no fish at all did that. Hit were a 'gator, jist to spite me, I reck'n."

Jackson Gardner uttered a whistle.

"A 'gator! Who ever heern of 'gators taking a bait off a catfish hook? You was asleep, Jake, and I knows it, and ef the ginerel onst ketches you at it, it's good-by Jake."

Jake began to wind up his line.

"He hain't done it yet, Jackson. Anyway it's all flummery, this guardin' the openin'. No one ain't be'n here for years and no one ain't at all likely to come."

"Reck'n yer right," responded Jackson, "but we ain't got no call to dispute. Orders is orders, and we-uns hev got to 'bey 'em."

Jake cast a cautious glance round him.

"Say, Jackson," he whispered, "twixt me and you, we hain't got to do no sich thing."

Jackson Gardner started up in the boat in which he had been lounging, so that Julian could see his face plainly.

He was a heavy-featured, placid-faced man, with gray eyes and sandy hair and beard, sprinkled with gray. His usual expression was that of sleepy good-nature and laziness.

Now, however, his gray eyes were bloodshot with anger, and his whole face changed to a look of wild ferocity that showed what a dangerous man he might be if fully roused, as he said fiercely:

"Hain't got to 'bey orders? Who sez so? Air you gwine to turn traitor, Jake Hardenberg?"

And as he spoke, he cocked a rifle and covered Jake menacingly.

CHAPTER XIX.

JULIAN'S DISCOVERIES.

To Julian the situation grew exciting, and not without ludicrous features.

The two men he realized to be enemies, but who they were he could not tell. And they seemed to be bent on ridding him of their presence by killing each other; for Jackson Gardner was in dead earnest, and Jake Hardenberg seemed to be equally angry as he caught up his own gun, calling out defiantly:

"Give a man a squar' chance. You call youself a Southern gemman? Hold up, till I get my ole shootin'-iron in order."

Jackson Gardner instantly elevated the end of his gun, a proceeding that rather relieved Julian, who was exactly behind Jake, and in range of Gardner's piece.

"We-uns is both gemmen, I hope, Mr. Jake," he said stiffly, "and I ain't the man to take no foul on no other man—no, siree. But I ain't no man, nuther, to hear no 'fluxions on de glorious Confederacy, sah—no, sah. What you mean by sayin' we hain't got no call to 'bey ordahs, sah?"

Jake had got his "old shooting-iron," as he called it, into position by this time, and Julian saw that he carried an old Spencer rifle of a by-gone pattern, which he cocked as he answered fiercely:

"I didn't say no sich thing, sah; and I don't want no words put in my mouf, sah, dat don't b'long dere, sah."

"Then what *did* you say, sah?" asked Jackson in the same sharp, menacing way, but with an affectation of deferential politeness that seemed very funny in both men with their rude dress and dialect. "I understood you to say, sah, when I made de remark that we-uns has to 'bey orders, dat we don't hev to do no sich thing. Is dat so, sah, or is it not, sah? I scorn to take any advantage of a gemman, sah, and I puts it to you—did you use dem words, sah?"

"No, sah!" vociferated Jake, with a loudness intended to emphasize the denial. "You ears is mistook you, sah. I said no sich t'ing."

Jackson Gardner's face cleared up instantly, and he replied, affably:

"Dat settles it, sah. A Southern gentleman's word is good at all times, sah. I will presume to ax, sah, what you did say, sah?"

"I said this, sah. You said, sah, that we-uns has got to 'bey ordahs, sar, wedder we like it or not, sah. Didn't you say so, sah?"

"I did, sah."

"Zackly so, sah, and I said, sah, dat *between you and me*, sah, don't you see, sah, we don't have to do no sich thing."

Jackson's face lowered again.

"Ain't dat the same thing, sah?"

"No, sah," responded Jake, boldly; "hit am a very different thing, as I'll show you, sah."

Julian caught a glimpse of his face as he spoke, and saw that he was a very different person from Gardner, with a long, narrow face and pointed black beard.

Intellectually he was Gardner's superior, and as he spoke he laid down his Spencer rifle and began to pat one forefinger on the other man, argumentative fashion.

"You see, sah," he pursued, "we-uns both belongs to the same regiment in the sabvice, doesn't we?"

"Yes," responded Jackson, slowly, laying

down his rifle while his face assumed a puzzled expression, "I admits that, sah."

"Then the fust proposition am proved to the complete satisfaction of the court," said Jake, triumphantly. "Now, sah, I ax you, sah, what is your rank in that regiment, sah?"

"I is fust private in the cullah comp'ny, sah," responded Gardner proudly, "and we nebber had a man leave them cullahs till he was carried off, feet fust."

Jake took off his hat and waved it in a grandiloquent and courteous manner.

"Very good, sah. I admit that the cullah comp'ny of the hundred and fust Texas is a good comp'ny as comp'nies go. I b'long to the seniah comp'ny of the regiment, sah. You admits that, sah?"

"Sartinly, sah; Cappen Pink's boys was allers reckoned mighty good yellers in a chaige, sah."

"Very good, sah. Now, sah, you please tell me, sah, how many men there is in the cullah comp'ny of the hunner and fust Texas?"

Gardner hesitated a moment and his gray face flushed slightly.

"You must remember, sah," he said, "that the cappen hez gone to the Ca'linas recruitin', and he hain't got back yet. We 'specks to be all full when he gits back. In the mean time, sah, I has to carry the cullahs, and dress on the nex' man."

"And you has no offisahs present?" demanded Jake, in the same inquisitorial way.

"No, sah," returned Gardner. "You is awaiab, sah, that the offisahs, all but Cappen Rutledge of the cullah comp'ny, was killed, sah. No, sah, the sahgent-majah, acting—which the same it is Cawp'l Stone of the fil' comp'ny—he do all the ordahs on the dress parades, sah."

Jake listened till he had finished, and then, with a very triumphant air, exclaimed:

"Then my p'sish'n prove, sah. Don't you see?"

Jackson stared stupidly.

"No, I don't, sah."

"Why, sah, you is on'y a privit, sah, and I is anudder privit, sah, and the hull regiment is jest five men, sah, all told, and the seniah offisah present is a cawp'l, sah, so that between you and me, sah, you ain't no call to ordah me, nor I to ordah you, and neider has any call to 'bey the oder's orders. You see, sah?"

Jackson Gardner rested a slow, ox-like gaze on Jake, and it seemed a full minute before he apprehended what the other evidently thought a very brilliant joke.

Then a slow smile illuminated his features, and he began to laugh, at first hesitatingly, but, as he proceeded with more assurance, till he roared out loud, and fell back in his boat, crying:

"Well, I swow to grashus! Ef you ain't the durndest cuss to make fun I ever see'd. I thort you was a-talkin' treasin'."

"Treasin'?" echoed Jake, scornfully. "Not I, ole man. We-uns has fit in too many scrimmages together to think of that. Got any 'backer?"

"Home made," responded Gardner, reaching into a pocket in his brown clothes and bringing out a twist, which he handed to Jake. "Say, ain't it 'bout time fur the gineral to go off arter the stores, Jake?"

"Reckon it is. We's gittin' outer ammunition, and a right smart heap o' things."

"Waal, I ain't gwine on the expedition, I hear. We-uns of the hunner and fust stays to hum for gyard. What's the orders, Jake?"

"Same as allers. Keep yer eyes skinned, and don't let no Yanks git past hyar. If they does, plug 'em, and fire all ye kin, to rouse the boys in the barrick."

Gardner immediately took his oars, rested his gun between his knees, and remarked:

"Waal, then, I'm gwine to patrol a bit."

"Patrol away," remarked Jake in answer. "Ye won't see nothin'. Who in blazes is gwine to come hyar, 'less he's like us, the tail end of the Confed'recy on detached sahvice. Reck'n the Yanks has got sicker tryin', sense we whipped 'em so bad. Good-by."

"Good-by," replied his friend, and then they parted, Jake rowing away toward one of the islands, while Gardner pursued his path out of the opening in the cedar swamp to the flooded Everglade outside.

Julian looked all round himself, and saw that he was completely screened by the gray curtain of moss that hung down to the water all round him.

He remained quite still till he heard the rumble of distant oars telling that Gardner was on his patrol at some distance, and then he peered out between the moss to look after him as he went.

He saw the honest member of the "hunner and fust Texas" rowing along the edge of the cedar bush, and wondered whether the man had found any suspicious trail.

He saw Gardner row near the trees, and heard, to his surprise, a general caterwauling of the panthers, while Gardner answered them with loud hails, and appeared to be talking to them as if they were tame, and he were well acquainted with them.

Then he saw him row directly under one of the trees, and begin to throw pieces of meat to

the panthers, at which there was a louder caterwauling than ever, and one of the beasts leaped down into the dug-out.

Julian started, expecting to see the man torn to pieces, but instead of that the beast picked up a piece of meat from the inside of the boat, and instantly leaped into the water and swam away, like a cat detected in stealing.

Then he heard Gardner shout fiercely:

"Scat! Scat! ye ornary brown cusses, d'ye want to steal yer wittles? Scat!"

With that he seized his oars and rowed off, scolding the brutes just as if they were tame cats. Julian was astounded.

This explained the boldness of the panther in following him from tree to tree. The brute was accustomed to being fed by a man in a boat, and thought Julian had brought it a ration of meat according to practice.

But he was very curious to see what would follow Gardner's patrol, and where it would terminate.

Very slowly he glided among the cypress trunks, so as to command a view of the rower, and saw that he was turning to come back.

This of course brought Gardner's back to him and he seized the opportunity to paddle to another covered space, which commanded a view of the great inner lake and the smoke, while it was entirely hidden from view by the gray-moss curtain.

Then he ensconced his canoe, and listened to the sound of the oars, while he watched the sun set, close to the mysterious smoke.

He had made up his mind what to do.

He would wait till night, then cover his canoe with moss to hide its whiteness, and explore the mystery before him.

What it was, he could not clearly divine.

That it was connected in some way with the defunct Southern Confederacy he felt sure; but in what way he knew not.

The men he had seen, seemed to imagine that the Confederacy was still in existence, and talked of some officer as being absent on recruiting service in the Carolinas.

What could it all mean?

Before he had settled the point to his own satisfaction, he heard the rumble of the oars in Gardner's dug-out, and the worthy member of the "hunner and fust" passed by him, not twenty feet away, scanning the cedar brush and moss.

For a moment Julian thought he was to be discovered, and he softly picked up his rifle, but Gardner passed on several hundred yards, and he saw him returning, just as the twilight advanced.

The man ceased pulling when he got to the opening in the belt, took in his oars, and Julian heard the splash of the anchor as he fastened his canoe.

Then Gardner rigged a long fish-pole, and tranquilly began to fish, with his face toward Julian, an occupation he continued till darkness and the full moon strove together for the mastery.

For some time Julian did not dare to move from his covert.

The moon had spoiled all his calculations of stealing away.

He watched the fisherman attentively, and noted that Gardner seemed to have very good luck, for he caught many fish.

As the night wore on a slight current set in, which swung the boat slowly round till the sentry's back was toward him, and then Julian backed slowly out through the trees into the Everglade, keeping the curtain of moss between him and Gardner.

Then he swept down the belt a little way, cut down a quantity of gray moss, and draped it over his canoe, bow and stern, letting it trail in the water.

He muffled the blade of his paddle with a sleeve of his flannel shirt, which he tore off for the purpose, and then swept into the midst of the cedar swamp, about a quarter of a mile below where the guard was stationed.

This was an easy matter in the overflowed state of the Everglade, and he soon saw the open water ahead.

Then with slow strokes of his paddle, and keeping his body down near the level of the deck, he stole out into the open water, silent as a ghost.

He kept his face turned toward Gardner, and saw that the sentry was out in the full flood of moonlight, his back turned toward the canoe, which was still in shadow, busily engaged in fishing.

He had no difficulty in increasing his distance, keeping in the shadow of the cedar swamp, and in this way he coasted away to the north till he was nearly a mile from the boat, which was almost invisible.

Then he took a survey of the lake, and swept slowly toward an island he saw at a little distance, which offered a shelter.

Three minutes later he saw the reflection of the orange groves on the coquina bluff just before the bows of the canoe, and put the island between him and the sentry.

Now he sat a little more upright, and made a little better progress, keeping a wary eye ahead and on either side.

He was close under the shadow of one island, saw another about half a mile away to the north, on which there seemed to be a house, but he was set on investigating the smoke ahead of him before he did anything else in the way of exploration.

Now that the sun was down, he saw flashes of light cast on the dark cloud from below, at intervals, which confirmed him in his idea that it must be a volcano, though he had never heard of a volcano in the Everglades of Florida, and could not believe it to be a common volcano.

Slowly and cautiously he circumnavigated the island, and as he came to the side next to the smoke, he perceived with surprise and some apprehension that a figure was moving up and down on the beach beside a tall pole.

Instantly he ceased paddling and sunk down into his canoe as before, watching the moving figure closely.

He soon ascertained that it was a man with a gun on his shoulder, walking up and down by a flag-staff as a sentry, with a white house at the foot of the bluff behind him.

In the windows of the house burned more than one light, and Julian could see figures moving about.

The sentry, whoever he was, had not seen the canoe, which had not yet got into the moonlight, and Julian leaned over the side away from the land, and began to paddle softly with his open hand, so as to steal away from the place.

Presently he heard a voice singing, and the sound of some instrument in the house. The air was a familiar one, sad and plaintive, and it was sung by a female voice of great sweetness.

He looked toward the house and saw a female figure by one of the lighted windows seated by a harp, as it appeared at that distance, while a man was standing near her.

And the man wore some sort of uniform, for Julian caught the gleam of buttons and a belt-plate.

There was something in the sound of the girl's voice that impressed Julian in a way he had never felt before.

Hitherto he had been a young man fond of all sorts of athletic exercise, a hunter, a rower, rider, bicyclist and so forth, not very fond of ladies' society, and never actually in love.

Perhaps it was the position in which he found himself, his dangerous but romantic surroundings, that caused such a sudden flood of emotion to sweep over him; but at that moment he felt as if he would have given anything in the world to speak to the girl, who was singing, though he could only see the outline of her form at a couple of hundred yards off, and her features were impossible to be distinguished.

He saw she had fair hair, and dressed in white, and that the man by her side was young and slender in figure, so that he forthwith began to hate the young man, and say to himself:

"I'd like to get you out in a quiet place with no one to interfere, my friend, and I'd tan your hide for you."

Though, a moment later, he smiled to think that it was no earthly business of his to do anything of the sort.

While he looked, he heard the girl close her song with the refrain:

"Maryland! my Maryland!"

Then he remembered what it was: "Why, that's an old Confederate song," he thought. "What sort of a place is this I've got into? Are the people all crazy?"

He thought so a moment later, when the girl began to sing another song, with a wild, spirit-stirring air, in which he caught the words:

"Hurrah for the bonny blue flag,
That wears the silver stars."

"That's one, certainly," he thought. "I've heard my father say so. But what does it all mean?"

Before he could determine, he found the view vanishing, and realized that a current was sweeping him past the house.

CHAPTER XX.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

JULIAN'S view through the open window had been intercepted by the trunk of a large tree that grew down near the water's edge, and he lifted his head, discovering that the tree was loaded with gray moss and would constitute a complete shade for him.

Overjoyed by this, he made the best of his way toward it, paddling with one hand, and finally found himself under its shade and able to draw his canoe under the shelter of the moss in silence.

Then he entered into the dark cavern of shade formed by the tree, and speedily made the discovery that his canoe was not alone.

Two canoes, dug-outs, smoothly finished to the touch, lay there, moored to the trunk of the tree, and Julian realized that the place was used as a boat-house by the inhabitants of the island.

The discovery made him very cautious, for he knew, from the fury with which the attack on the light-house had been conducted, that he was in the presence of desperate men, who would not hesitate to kill him on sight.

Very softly he drew up to the shore, and shoved his own canoe into a place under the curtain of moss, where he judged it would not be seen if any one came to take a sail in the moonlight.

Then he took his rifle and stepped ashore, finding himself on a broad gravel walk that looked perfectly civilized, leading up from the boat-house and bordered with thick shrubbery.

Naturally he took to the shrubbery and stole quietly along, keeping a keen lookout for the sentry.

In a very few minutes he saw the man very distinctly, dressed in a gray uniform, with a slouch hat and gray feather on his head, quite different from the guard at the entrance to the mysterious lake.

Whatever the house, Julian had sense enough to see that it must be the abode of some person distinguished in this peculiar place, and his heart beat high with hope that he was about to discover the whole secret.

He passed the sentry without detection, and went through the shrubbery till he got near to the house and perceived that it was surrounded by an open lawn.

Further advance was impossible, unless he could make any one in the house look the other way.

This was not possible; for the very girl he had heard singing was now sitting on what he saw was a veranda, not fifty feet away from him, looking straight toward him.

The house, he saw, was a low structure of logs, whitewashed and surrounded by this broad veranda of rustic work, the top of which formed a balcony running all round the second story, which was surrounded with a flat roof of thatch.

The girl sat in the full glare of the moonlight, half reclining in a hammock, fanning herself, and he heard her say positively:

"Oh, Ned, I do wish pa would come home. I'm so tired of this pokey old place, with nothing but trees to look at. When did he say he'd come?"

Julian looked for Ned, and saw the glow of a cigar, some distance off, in the shadow of the veranda.

"Don't be so impatient, sis," said a voice. "I don't see the place is so pokey. There's plenty of shooting and hunting, I'm sure."

"Shooting and hunting?" echoed the girl, scornfully. "That's all you boys think of. I don't fish and hunt. I've got nothing to do but sew and spin, and play on that old harp, till I'm tired. If you were a decent brother, like other girls' brothers, you'd get father to take us away out of here."

Julian's heart beat rapidly. He felt that Ned might not be such a villain that it was necessary for him to enter into physical contest with him. Ned was brother to this girl with a sweet voice. Julian felt as if he should like to shake hands with Ned.

The cigar glowed in the darkness a little while longer, and then Ned observed:

"Where in the world do you want to go, Clara? Paris or London?"

"Neither," returned the girl, fanning herself. "I want to see something of my own country first. I want to see New York."

"New York!" echoed Ned, as if horrified. "Why, do you want to go and join the Yankees at once?"

"No, I don't want any such thing," she replied; "but you've been telling me, for ever so long, how General Lee was getting closer and closer to it all the time, and sure to take it in a week or two, and I want to run the blockade and go there, to see what it's like. Aunt Chloe told me, only yesterday, all sorts of wonderful things about it."

Julian rubbed his eyes. Was he dreaming, and was it possible that here was a girl who really believed General Lee to be alive and that he was besieging New York?

"I think, Clara," returned Ned, with dignity, "that your speech is a very improper one for the daughter of General Beverly Peyton. If you had said Paris, I might have agreed with you, for I myself long to see Paris."

"Well, I don't care whether it's Paris or New York," returned Clara, positively. "I want to get out of here somehow. What's the use of being eighteen, and a Peyton, if no one can see you but your own brother?"

"Hum!" said her own brother, nettled. "I think, miss, that if you can't appreciate the honor of having a brother, other people can. There's Mame Armistead, for instance."

"Mame Armistead may, but I don't," said Clara, rather pertly. "She hasn't got a brother, and I suppose she thinks it's a wonderful thing to have one. I'm sure she's welcome to you, Captain Peyton, A. A. G. and A. D. C. and A. Q. M. G. and all the other titles you're so proud of. I do think the Confederacy might afford us another officer, down in this hole of a place, to wear some of the useless titles you keep dangling around you."

Ned rose up and came out into the moonlight, and Julian could see that he was a tall and exceedingly handsome young man, with a downy, black mustache, and that he wore a closely-fitting gray uniform with considerable gold lace

on it, and carried a sword. He looked angry as he said:

"I think, Clara, that your words are very much out of place, when you know the straits in which our country is placed. I am willing to assume all the posts and do all the work I can; if I can help the Confederacy, till the general thinks best to call me to the field."

Clara pouted her pretty lips. Julian could see that they were exceedingly pretty, and that she had brown hair and dark eyes.

"I don't believe you'll ever get called to the field, Ned," she said, with a shrug. "I've heard so much about the war since I was a baby that I sometimes think I don't believe all I hear."

"Clara Peyton!" cried Ned, aghast; "can I believe my ears? Are you crazy, miss? Haven't I received the dispatches and read them out on parade? Capture of Philadelphia, capture of Washington, siege of New York, destruction of the Yankee fleet? Do you think they dare tell lies in a general order? I'm amazed at you!"

"Then why do we stay here?" asked Clara, who had been waiting her chance. "If our men are riding over the Yankees so fast, why don't we go to the North and get out of this place?"

"It's not for me to ask," returned Ned, very stiffly. "It's my place to obey orders. I'm going out to make grand rounds, miss, so I'll leave you to your reflections."

And he wheeled round in excessively military fashion and stalked away, when Clara jumped up all of a sudden, caught him round the neck, and said, coaxingly:

"There, there, Ned, I didn't mean to tease you, but I do get moped up in this old place. Do please tease pa to take me away."

"He will when orders allow it," said Ned more graciously. "See here, sis, I may get a chance to be sent off to Europe on special duty and take you with me. How would that suit you?"

"To perfection," returned Clara rapturously. "Oh! Ned, do tell me the truth, the real truth. Are you not tired of being here?"

Ned seemed to be mollified, for he answered:

"Of course I am; but then it's my duty not to complain. There, there, Clara, don't hug me so; it's too warm."

Julian thought to himself that Ned was a good deal of a brute after all, and felt sure that he himself would not have objected to any amount of hugging from those white arms.

Clara instantly released her brother, and pushed him away, saying:

"You're a regular bear, Ned Peyton! I'm glad you're going, though I don't see what's the use of your going all over this lake every night to go through a nonsensical ceremony."

"Nonsensical ceremony!" cried Ned. "What do you mean, Clara Peyton?"

"I mean all that nonsense about, 'Halt! who goes there? Grand rounds,' and all the rest of it, just to be able to whisper a word into a man's ear."

Ned seemed to be still more nettled at the free criticism of the girl, for he answered spitefully:

"You'd better speak about things you understand, Miss Clara. Perhaps you don't know that, but for those very ceremonies you despise, our camp might be invaded at any moment by the enemy. You try to run the lines some time without the word and you'll find out what is the use of a countersign."

Clara tittered.

"I suppose so. Maybe I'll try it some night, but you may be sure I'll get the word from you before I do it."

"No you won't," retorted Ned. "The word is a sacred deposit not to be intrusted to every one."

"But you'll give it to me, won't you, Ned dear?" said the girl coaxingly. "Ah now, I was only just joking to tease you. I want the word to-night, because I want to go out in my canoe, and I don't want to be stopped by those rough men over on the south side. You'll give me the word, won't you, Ned dear? Pa always lets me have it when he's here. He says the family of the commanding officer is entitled to it. Won't you give me the word, Ned?"

Julian listened intently, for he saw that Ned was going to yield to his pretty sister, and he thought all the better of Ned for it.

"Well," said the young officer, "if the general does so, it must be right. The word for to-night is 'Richmond,' the parole 'Jackson.' The parole is only to be given to officers, you know."

Clara tittered again.

"Officers indeed! Why you're the only one in the whole garrison, except old Major Buckbee, and he's on crutches."

Ned seemed to be angry again.

"You should speak more respectfully of a gallant officer, crippled in his country's service, Clara. Major Buckbee commands the department of the Everglades—"

"With nine men for his army," interposed the incorrigible Clara.

"What matter for that? If he only had one, he would be entitled to respect. One Confederate soldier is equal to five Yankees any day."

"That gives him forty-five men for his army

then, brother Ned. Well, good-night. I'll own one thing about the major."

"And what's that?" asked Ned.

"He can swear worse than any man I ever heard, when he thinks I'm not near him."

CHAPTER XXI.

A FAIR FOE.

JULIAN GREY crouched low in the shelter of the shrubbery as the young officer came off the rustic veranda and down the steps into the lawn.

He saw him leave the gravel path, take a short cut through the shrubbery and go down toward the boat-house under the tree, whence he soon emerged in a canoe, sweeping out into the moonlight.

Pretty soon the canoe disappeared round the end of the island, and Julian was left alone to watch the young lady on the balcony, who had resumed her seat in the hammock and sat fanning herself and musing.

Presently Julian began to wish she would say something, but she did not seem much inclined to talk to herself.

He watched her for some time, till he saw her turn her head toward the house, and heard her call out:

"Auntie, Aunt Chloe!"

There was a short silence, and she repeated the call, when Julian heard the shuffling of bare feet in the house and a hoarse voice answered:

"Yes, Missy Clarry, I'se coming, honey."

Then into the moonlight on the veranda waddled one of the fattest old black women Julian had ever seen, inquiring:

"What you want, honey? I'se here."

"I want you to get me my bat and jacket, Auntie. I'm going on the water," said Clara.

"Lordy, chile, you ain't gwine to do no sich t'ing," said Aunt Chloe, positively. "De fever's in de night air, and I doesn't want you to ketch it. Who hab to nurse you, if you git a chill, honey?"

"Why, you of course, Auntie," returned the girl. "I couldn't wish a better one. But we don't have any fever this time of year. I want to go over and see the fire flash in the smoke in the moonlight. It's grand."

"Don't you go dar, chile, 'less you want to see de debbil and all his imps," said Aunt Chloe as positively. "I'se live here longer'n you kin remember, and dat ain't no fittin' place fur a chile like you to go."

"Well, I'm going, anyway," returned Clara, sharply, "and I'll trouble you to do as I tell you. Get me my bat and jacket."

"All right, chile, all right," said Aunt Chloe, in a tone of resignation, as she turned round to waddle into the house. "I'se gwine; but ef you see de debbil, don't say Aunt Chloe didn't tell you not to go dar."

Clara laughed as the old woman went off, and began to hum "The Bonny Blue Flag," and pat her foot on the floor, till Chloe came back with a broad hat and a loose jacket, which the young lady donned, and tripped down the steps, taking the gravel walk to the tree where the boats were moored.

Julian instantly rose and took a short cut through the shrubbery to the same place, for he had formed an idea.

He had determined to intercept his fair foe, and attempt to speak to her.

He heard the sentry by the flagstaff halt her in regular military fashion, and heard her answer the hail, so that he had plenty of time to get to the moss-draped tree and enter his canoe, which he drew to the other side of the foliage, away from the sentry.

On that side the water was all clear, and he was close under the shadow of a high rock bluff.

He had made up his mind to play patrol, as the easiest way to lull the girl's fears, if she had any; and he knew that his gray dress and slouch hat sufficiently resembled the uniform in use round the secret lake for him to be able to play the part in moonlight, though daylight might make a difference.

Very soon he heard the light footsteps of Clara Peyton coming to the tree, heard her untie one of the boats fastened to the trunk, and this was soon followed by the splash of the paddle, when he boldly dipped in his own, and glided on in the shadow of the rock, till the girl's canoe came into sight.

She did not seem to be surprised at seeing him, however; but continued her course, heading directly for the smoke, and he followed leisurely, as if he had been ordered to watch her.

In this way the two canoes continued on for nearly half an hour, till Julian saw that they were in open water, at least a mile from any land, when he increased his pace and swept up nearer to the dug out canoe, a proceeding which instantly called from the girl the startled cry:

"How dare you row so close? Fall back, sir. Do you know who I am?"

She spoke in the imperious tone of one used to being obeyed, and Julian replied, trying to put on the "cracker" dialect:

"Tain't my fault, miss. Cappen Peyton he

said as how I were to keep clos't to ye, so ye moutn't come to harm."

"Oh, is that it?" responded Clara, more affably. "In that case I beg your pardon, my man. You can come closer. What's your name?"

"My name, miss?"

The question stumped him a moment, but he remembered in time to answer with a salute:

"Jackson Gardner, miss, hunner and fust Texas."

Clara started slightly and said:

"Come closer, so I can see your face."

The young man did as he was requested, and had the pleasure of being inspected by as keen a pair of eyes as ever looked out of a girl's head, and a handsome pair withal.

Clara Peyton looked at him as if she had never been used to looking at any but her inferiors, and when she had concluded her inspection she said deliberately:

"You're not one of our men. What's the use of telling me a story like that?"

Julian was startled, more so than the girl, though he could see, from something in her manner and the wide, open stare of her eyes, that she was frightened, and trying to hide it from him.

"How do you know I'm not one of your men?" he asked, dropping his accent.

"Because I know Jackson Gardner," she answered, scanning him still more closely. "Besides, you don't talk like one of our men at all. Who are you, anyway?"

Julian smiled and took off his hat.

"Young lady," he said, "you're right. I am one of the men you have been taught to hate—a Yankee—and I come from New York last, though I was born in Boston."

The face of his fair enemy was a study while he spoke.

At first she turned deadly pale, and seemed frightened to death; then flushed deeply as she said in a low voice:

"You! A Yankee! How did you get in?"

"I came in in my boat, as I shall go out," was the quiet reply.

Clara shook her head.

"No, you can't," she said. "You can't pass the lines without the word, and I'm not going to give it to you, because it's my duty to take you prisoner."

Julian could not resist a smile.

"I am your prisoner already, Miss Peyton."

"How do you know my name?" she asked, starting back amazed.

"I know that, and a good deal more," said Julian, smiling in the same encouraging way to banish her fears. "I can pass your lines whenever I please, for I have the word for the night, but I don't want to do it. I told you before, I am your prisoner, captive to your eyes. Do with me what you will."

The girl was very red in the moonlight, now, and it was with a little nervous laugh she said:

"You're very willing to surrender, but you don't know what we do with our prisoners."

"I don't know and I don't care," said the young man, quite intoxicated with his position. "You can make me your slave, and I'll serve you cheerfully."

"But are you really a Yankee?" asked Clara, curiously. "You don't look like one."

"How do you suppose Yankees look?" asked he.

"Oh, I don't know. I've heard they were all coarse, ungentelemanly creatures, with big feet and hatchet-faces and—you don't look like a Yankee."

Julian laughed; he couldn't help it.

"Thank you for the compliment. I've not got a hatchet-face or big feet."

"But how did you get out of New York?" the girl went on. "I thought our men were all round it. Is the siege raised?"

Julian hesitated. He hardly knew what to say. Here was a young creature as innocent as a baby, who had been brought up in a state of delusion from which it might not be easy to wake her.

Moreover, her father, whoever he was, had been the means of deceiving her, with some pious notion no doubt; and Julian did not like to expose a parent to a child.

So he answered evasively:

"Oh, I managed to get out. How many men have you in your post here, Miss Peyton?"

The young lady laughed at him.

"Now I do believe you're a Yankee. They always ask impertinent questions, I'm told."

"Who told you, Miss Peyton?"

"My father, sir, commander of the district," she answered proudly. "I suppose all of you Yankees have heard of General Beverly Peyton, Commander of the Southern Military District. He has made you Yankees run many a time."

"We all tremble at the sound of his name, Miss Peyton, as the Saracens trembled at that of the Great Richard of the Lion Heart," said Julian gravely.

"But let me ask you one question: How would you like to see the North—New York or Boston for instance?"

Clara looked at him wistfully.

"I shall never see them, I'm afraid," she

said. "Oh, how I wish sometimes that this dreadful war were over! Here it seems as if I had never known, since I began to know anything, what peace was. I'm weary to death of it all."

"And suppose I told you," said Julian, slowly, and watching her all the time, "that it was over, and had been over eighteen or twenty years."

The young lady looked at him quickly.

"I shouldn't believe you, sir. My father has told me never to believe what the Yankees say."

"Your father is not complimentary to the poor Yankees," returned Julian. "I'm sorry you're so prejudiced, Miss Peyton, but I must submit. What are you going to do with me now?"

"Take you in and give you up to the guards," said the lady, decidedly.

"And what will the guards do with me?"

"I'm sure I don't know. Kill you, I suppose."

"Do you want to see me killed?"

"Why, no."

"Then why will you give me up to the guard?"

"Because you give yourself up to me. I must do my duty you know."

"But you haven't got any duties," said Julian, with a smile. "Ladies have no military duties. Their only business is to look and be as charming as possible."

"Then why do you surrender to me?" she asked.

"Because I want to see if you have a woman's heart, or if you hate a Yankee so much that you would willingly give up one to death," said Julian, softly. "See, Miss Peyton, here I am, all alone in the midst of your people, but I've never done you any harm, have I?"

"No," said she, reluctantly. "I don't want to hurt you, but you ought to have kept away. All we want is to be let alone."

"Very well, then," said Julian, readily. "If that's the case, why don't you tell me to go away and which way to go? I'll leave you alone."

Clara brightened up instantly.

"I never thought of that," she said, frankly. "Of course you can go away till the war's over. After that I shall be glad to see you."

"Will you really be glad to see me when the war's over, as you call it?" asked Julian, earnestly.

Somehow or other the canoes had drifted together during the colloquy, and the two people sat side by side in such a position that they could look into each other's eyes, and Julian saw that the girl's eyes sunk under his own.

"I'm sure," she murmured, "I don't see why I shouldn't, if there's peace. The chaplain has told me that we are all Americans, and that when the war is over we ought to love each other just as we did before it."

Julian softly glided his hand under hers and asked her gently:

"Miss Peyton, do you think I'm a very wicked Yankee for daring to love a Southern lady before the war is over?"

She flushed scarlet and drew away her hand, murmuring confusedly.

"I—I—what do you mean? I don't understand you, sir."

"I mean," said Julian, "that I never saw you before this evening, but that I loved you from the first moment I heard your voice at the window singing the 'Bonny Blue Flag,' and that had I not heard and seen you, I might still have been an enemy to your father. Now, please hear me, and believe what I tell you. You have been living in a dream all your life. There is no war. It ended before you were born in the capture of General Lee and all his army."

"Oh!" interrupted Clara with her eyes like saucers. "What do you mean by telling me such a great, big, wicked untruth as that? Are you not ashamed? General Lee was never captured. He took Philadelphia last year."

Julian felt puzzled.

"What am I to do with you?" he said, despairingly. "You've been shut up here and don't know what has been going on in the world. You ask your father when he comes home if it is not true General Lee surrendered his whole army at Appomattox Court House in April, 1865. See what he says. He'll know that you have seen what he calls a Yankee. I don't know what he intends by keeping up such a farce down in this corner of the land, but if ever he is found out, his army of nine men, Major Buckbee and all, will vanish like so much smoke I can assure you."

The girl listened to him like one in a dream, and then drew a long sigh saying:

"Oh dear, what am I to believe? Go away for Heaven's sake, Mr. —"

"My name is Julian Grey," returned the young man bowing. "I will not trouble you any more, Miss Peyton. I can hardly believe my own senses to-night. It seems like a dream to me to find such a place as this."

"And it's like a dream to me to see a stranger," said Clara simply. "You're the first I've ever seen in all my life, except Captain Rutledge."

A quick spasm of jealousy animated Julian in a moment as he asked:

"And who's Captain Rutledge?"

"An old officer who sometimes comes to see us. He never wears a uniform, and he tells me that he has to come in by running the blockade," said Clara, innocently. "He lives in Fernandina, I believe."

"And does he come often?" asked Julian, not knowing what to make of this news.

"Why, yes, and he always goes back with a cargo to France," said Clara.

"A cargo to France?" echoed Julian.

"Why, yes, didn't you know? Oh, I forgot. I'm talking just as if you were one of our own men," said Clara, with a nervous sort of laugh. "Yes, I mean when the Stonewall goes."

Julian was about to answer, when something induced him to turn his head to look behind him, and he saw a boat, not very far off, moving toward him stealthily.

No sooner did he see it than instinct told him to seize his rifle and hail:

"Boat ahoy! Halt! who goes there?"

CHAPTER XXII.

FOUND OUT.

JULIAN saw that the boat coming toward him was larger than his own canoe, pulled four oars and had a man steering.

It stopped rowing in answer to his hail, and the answer came back:

"Grand Rounds!"

"It's Ned," whispered Clara in Julian's ear; "let me answer him."

Then aloud she called out:

"Is that you, Ned? Why don't you call out the word like a man?"

There was a smothered laugh from the men in the boat, and the voice of Ned answered, with considerable asperity:

"What are you doing out here, putting us to all this trouble and disarranging the lines? Who's that in the canoe by you?"

"A friend of mine—none of your affair," retorted the girl flippantly. "You keep off, or I'll tell him to shoot at you, Ned."

Ned seemed to be exceedingly disgusted, for his dignity was hurt by the treatment of his sister, but he made shift to answer:

"Very well, Miss Clara, when the general comes home I shall inform him of your capers."

Then turning to his men he said:

"Give way; it's all right."

The boat swept on, and Julian seized Clara's hand and began to murmur all sorts of thanks to her for not having given him up to death.

She smiled and seemed not ill-pleased at the earnest manner of the handsome youth, and asked him:

"Well, what are you going to do now, Mr. Grey? Here you are, in the midst of our men, and how are you going to get out?"

"I don't know," he answered, "unless you will show me the way. I leave my life in your hands, Miss Peyton."

"Which way did you come in?" she asked.

"Out yonder from the east, through the opening in the cedar bush into the Everglade."

Clara looked surprised.

"That way? Why, you must have passed the special guard my father placed there."

"I did, without his hearing or seeing me."

"But you cannot go back that way."

"Why not?"

"Because they patrol there twice a day, and you're sure to run into some of the boats."

"Then which way am I to go?"

Clara turned and pointed to the black smoke. They were close enough to it now to perceive that it came from the cone of a small volcanic hillock that resembled a mole-hill.

"Yonder," said Clara, "is the signal-station."

"The signal-station," he said, vaguely.

"Yes. That is the place they signal to the coast when a storm comes on."

"How do they do it?"

"I don't know exactly. They throw down something or other that makes it puff out thick and black—the smoke, I mean. But if you get out, you'll have to go that way. They will take you for one of our own men, and you may meet the Stonewall coming up."

"The Stonewall? What is the Stonewall?"

"Our vessel," said Clara, rather proudly; "the Stonewall Jackson. She comes up here for her cargo and runs off to France."

"And suppose I meet her, what then?"

"Why, you can pretend you're one of our men, and they won't know you, for her people only come in now and then," said Clara, readily.

"Why, I can make out an order, for that matter, and put father's name to it. They'll never know the difference."

"And do you mean to say you would do this for me, a stranger?" asked Julian, earnestly.

Clara hesitated a moment, and gave a little nervous laugh as she said:

"I know it's very wicked. If Ned found it out he'd be furious, but I don't know how it is. Somehow I don't feel as if you were an enemy that ought to be killed, and I want to save your life."

Julian pressed her hand, saying earnestly:

"Miss Peyton, you're an angel and you don't know it, an angel of goodness. I came here in

mere curiosity, attracted by that smoke and expecting to find a nest of pirates, but I am going away having found an angel, and determined to bring her back to the world. I will not go back by the way you propose. To do so would be to force you to do an unworthy action and I cannot do that. I am going to run the gantlet of your guards to the north. I have found all I want to know now."

"Don't go that way," said Clara pleadingly. "You don't know the danger. The men have orders to shoot any stranger on sight if he comes that way."

Her face was full of anxiety, and she laid her hand on his arm unconsciously as she repeated:

"Don't go that way! You'll be killed!"

Julian took the little hand and kissed it with great respect, then answered:

"I am very sorry, but I must go. When I come back you will see that I have told the truth. There is no war and has been none for nearly twenty years."

Then he threw the moss covering off his canoe and revealed it in all its swift grace of proportion, adding:

"I can out-run any boat you have in this settlement, so far as I've seen. Good-by, Miss Peyton, and God bless you. Don't forget, when you hear the Yankees abused, that Julian Grey would not take advantage of you, when he might have done so."

"Farewell," said Clara, in a low tone, and then he kissed her hand a second time and set off with a few powerful strokes of his paddle in the way he had come.

He knew from the pace at which he went that he could defy pursuit in a straightway stern chase, but he also knew that the lake must be infested with enemies, how many he did not yet know.

There were nine at least, as he had heard, under a certain Major Buckbee, but there must be more somewhere.

He had seen two houses on the island, and there were five men in one boat, while there was a sentry at the flagstaff and another at the opening into the Everglade. That made seven, and Julian knew enough of military matters to be sure that there were at least reliefs for all the sentries. To keep up such a guard, besides the wreckers at the beach, whom he judged to belong to the same party, required at least fifty men, all told.

And one against fifty is heavy odds.

Julian Grey felt his heart beating more rapidly than its wont as he turned his course to the north and swept along with slow strokes. In the distance he could still see the four-oared boat crawling along against the front of one of the islands and he determined to keep in the wake of this craft and see where it went.

He knew that he had not been suspected as a stranger or Ned Peyton would have come after him.

Evidently the dandified young officer had thought Julian to be some member of the garrison with whom Clara was carrying on a reprehensible flirtation, but whose identity he did not wish to penetrate.

So he swept on his path, passing several islands and noticing that on every one was a house, low and white-washed, while lights were burning in almost all.

Keeping the "grand rounds" boat well ahead of him, he passed close to one of these and heard the shrill voice of a woman scolding some children who were scampering about in a state of decided undress.

"You Jeff Davis Gardner," she cried, "you git right in thar and go to bed! You hyar me? You Stonewall Jackson Gardner, how dar' you be runnin' 'baout hyar? Git right in thar!"

And he heard the sound of slaps with the sole of a maternal slipper, and the cries of mingled pain, expostulation and derision of a pair of unruly boys.

But there seemed to be no men on the island.

"The men must all be married, and their families are in these houses," he thought, as he swept on to be arrested presently by the cry:

"Oh, mammy, mammy, look at that white canoe outside! I'll bet it's Monroe Bivins' new one that he's be'n makin' sich a secret of."

"You git into the haouse and leave Monroe Bivins alone," was the unsympathetic reply; and then Julian passed the island and saw the four-oared boat coming back from a visit to the line of the cedar swamp, and in a course that must cause them to meet if he took no measures to avert the danger.

The boat seemed to be a slow, clumsy puller, and he immediately altered his own course to put another island between him and her.

He glided along with considerable speed, and took a diagonal course across the bows of the four-oar, but was alarmed to see that the boat instantly changed her course and made straight for him, while the sound of oars in the rowlocks moving with a great deal of rapidity showed that the officer of the "grand rounds" was suspicious and determined to hail the stranger.

And Julian knew that in that boat was Clara Peyton's brother, while he already realized that he was in love with Clara Peyton herself.

And he further realized that his only way to escape the pursuit of that boat and prevent his probable capture and death was to fire into it if he could not outpace it.

"I'll try the first when I can't do the second," he said to himself, and then he dug in his paddle and darted away to the island for which he was aiming.

He saw a house on its shore and as he passed by, a man ran out calling:

"Halt! thar in that canoe. Who air ye?"

"A friend," cried back Julian as he plied his paddle harder than ever, for he saw the man had a gun in his hand. "I'm on duty and the word's Richmond. Don't stop me."

The man seemed surprised but answered:

"All right, whoever ye air, but we ain't used to hollerin' out the counter-sign like a ginerall order. Git along!"

Julian rushed on and cast a glance back over his shoulder.

The four-oared boat was just vanishing on the other side of the island.

He knew that it must have done so in the hope of intercepting him by a shorter cut so he plied his paddle harder than ever.

He was not mistaken, for when he next saw the boat it was less than two hundred yards off pulling lustily and he heard the voice of Ned Peyton crying:

"Halt there in that boat! Halt or I'll fire at you! Halt, I say!"

Then as Julian continued to paddle on, faster than before, crack went a rifle and the bullet sung past Julian's head just grazing one ear in its passage, and making Julian think for an instant that he was struck, so severe was the shock.

The next minute he dropped his paddle, picked up his rifle and turned to fire into the boat with his Winchester rifle.

The distance was so short, the boat such a big target, the broad backs of the men so conspicuous that he had no difficulty in putting in four shots in as many seconds tumbling the rowers over in confusion.

Then he called out angrily:

"One Yankee can beat five of your men, Mr. Peyton. Good-night."

Then he resumed his paddle and darted off, leaving the boat behind at a standstill, not another shot being returned.

Ned Peyton seemed to be completely paralyzed for a moment, for Julian was an excellent shot and every bullet had prostrated one of the rowers, as if by a thunderbolt, while Grey was himself out of danger.

Then he picked up another rifle which lay in the bottom of the boat, a long single-barrel, muzzle-loader, and leveled it carefully at the canoe, now fast escaping.

A flash and report was followed by the sharp crack of the bullet, and Ned cried out:

"Get up, you that can. Pull on. I've crippled him, I'm sure."

Two of his men were only slightly hurt, though they had dropped their oars and fallen back from the shock, but now they rowed on again as well as they could.

The canoe had stopped.

Peyton's bullet, aimed closely, had struck the paddle in Julian's hand and knocked it flying into the water ahead, while Grey seemed to be trying to propel himself toward it by the palms of his hands alone.

In fact the bullet had not only split the paddle but it had grazed and drawn blood from Julian's left hand, which was uppermost on the paddle at the time, and he began to feel nervous as to the result.

He looked back and saw Peyton ramming down a charge for another shot, while the two crippled men were rowing on as well as they could.

"I must fight even him," said Julian to himself. "I wonder if she will ever forgive me if I wound him?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

JULIAN'S FLIGHT.

JULIAN swept on with his hands till he came to the place where the broken paddle still floated, and found to his joy that the injury was only to the middle, between the blades. Instead of one long double paddle he had now two short, single ones, after he had broken the staff completely.

This did not take long when he bent it over his knee, and away he went, with nearly as much speed as before, sweeping from side to side to distract the aim of his pursuer, who, he perceived in the bright moonlight, was getting ready for another shot.

Presently he saw the flash and swerved just in time to receive a bullet in the large muscle of his left shoulder instead of his back, the missile plowing its way just under the skin, and making a painful but not dangerous wound.

For one moment he was tempted to retaliate, but controlled himself and swept on as rapidly as before, leaving the boat far behind.

When next the flash came the bullet whizzed by him, so that he saw he had confused his enemy's aim, and that was the last shot fired at him from the boat.

When he looked back a few minutes later it was lying still on the water, and he saw the young officer bending over one of the men, who seemed to have fallen back in the boat, dead or dying.

Julian looked all round him warily.

He was alone as far as he could see, the nearest island about a quarter of a mile off; but before him lay the belt of cedar swamp, and he did not know what it contained.

He took up his rifle and put in four shells to replace those he had fired away, then swept cautiously on toward the cedar belt, which lay about half a mile off.

When he approached it all was silent and dark, while the water still stood up to the lower limbs of some of the smaller trees.

Slowly and cautiously he neared it, his eyes glancing from side to side, when he heard, out of the depths of the swamp, the hail:

"Halt! who comes there?"

"A friend!" he answered.

"Halt, friend!" cried the voice. "You jest wait thar till I calls the corporal."

"All right," returned Julian, straining his eyes to find who was there and where he was, for no one was visible.

Then the concealed man began to yell loudly:

"Corporal of the guard Number Five!"

Julian waited till he was in the midst of his call, when he gave a dexterous silent sweep of his paddle, and glided nearer, calling:

"What's the use of calling the corporal or captain. Peyton sent me here and I've got the word."

"Then why in blazes don't you say so?" cried the invisible man. "I haint got no need to break my voice a hollerin' fur the corp'l when he ain't likely nowhere nigh. Advance and give the countersign you or'nary galoot."

"Where are you then?" retorted Julian.

"Hyar," was the response, and he saw a dark canoe shoot out from the swamp.

He advanced with a couple of sweeps till he was close to the man, who proved to be an exact duplicate of Jackson Gardner and the men who had attacked the light-house, tall, bony, yellow-haired and frowsy-bearded, with dull face under a broad hat.

He was dressed in brown, with belts on him, and a long rifle, which he held covering Julian, as he said:

"Come, trot her out, stranger! The word!"

"Richmond," replied Julian, and the man threw up his gun, answering:

"Correct! Pass on!"

But Julian was not disposed to pass so soon, for now that the man had thrown up his gun he suddenly leveled his own, saying:

"Drop that gun in the water. You're my prisoner."

The man was so much astounded that he could only ejaculate:

"Holy smokes! who be you?"

"A Yankee," replied Grey, sternly. "Down with your gun, or I shoot."

To his surprise, the man not only did as he ordered, but burst out laughing, saying:

"Glory, hallelujah! I'm glad it's over. Gimme my parole, stranger, and I'll go anywhar you say, on the word of Zek'l Dummit."

Julian kept the rifle pointed at him, demanding:

"What do you mean by trying to shoot me in the first place? Don't you know the war's over long ago?"

The man scratched his head.

"Over? Reckon I didn't. The general says it ain't. Anyway, I'm tired of it, and I'm sorry I didn't surrender with the rest. D'yer want me to go with yer, Yank?"

"Yes," said Julian, sternly, "and remember, at the first sign of treachery I shoot you dead. How many men have you got here?"

The man hesitated.

"Reckon 'baout three-score, Yank. But you ain't gwine to hurt 'em, are you? We 'uns ain't done you 'uns no harm, all alone in these hyar swamps. Ye mout leave us alone a bit."

"Is it no harm to rob wrecks and murder people?" asked Julian, sternly. "I come from the light-house at Jupiter Inlet."

The man looked confused.

"I never 'lowed to go in with the wreckin' biz, Yank," he said, earnestly. "We 'uns out hyar haint nothen to do with that. The ginerall manages all that with the men of the coast gyard. He don't let us know nothin' what's gwine on since we sot up this post."

"Do you know a man called Alligator Ike, who belongs here?" asked Julian suddenly.

The man looked puzzled.

"Alligator Ike? No. Never heard sich a name, Yank, thof any of us mout hev it, fair enough; fur we does thin the 'gators in right smart style."

"Well, never mind him, then. You go on straight through this swamp and show me the way into the open Everglade," said Grey.

"Stop, what's your name?"

"Zek'l Dummit, stranger."

"Well, Mr. Dummit, git up and git. I think thar's the way you call it here."

Zeke laughed.

"Reckon you've lived hyar, Yank. All right. I'll git."

He turned and propelled his clumsy dug-out canoe through the submerged swamp with Julian close behind him, the young man keeping a wary eye on his movements.

More than once they heard the caterwauling of panthers on the trees close by, and Zeke looked a little apprehensive, saying:

"Come on quick, Yank. The brutes is hungry sence the flood, and mebbe they might take a fancy to chaw us, instead of the meat."

Once Julian saw a brown figure on a branch ahead, and the gleam of a pair of green eyes showed him that a panther was waiting for them, so he drew up his rifle and fired for the eyes.

Instantly there was a wild screech and the beast leaped into the water and came swimming for the canoe, while Julian put three shots into its head, the last almost touching it before it sunk.

Zeke uttered a cry of surprise.

"Why how many charges hev ye got in that ere shot-gun?"

"Enough more to kill a dozen such as that and finish you besides," said Julian, not unwilling to impress the other with the value of his weapon.

"The lands alive!" ejaculated Zeke. "No wonder you Yanks beat the pore old Confedericy, ef you all hev sich things as that. I ain't got nothen more to say, not a word, stranger. I cave."

He paddled along resignedly, till they began to see a gleam of light ahead through the trees, when he observed:

"Thar's the Everglade, stranger. We hain't got no more gyards all the way to the St. John's, but look out fur the 'gator men."

"'Gator men? Who are they?"

"The hunters, stranger. The gin'ral's out with 'em most of the time, and they's dangerous, you bet."

"Are they your men?"

"Some is and more isn't. More's Injuns and sich like. They don't like strangers gwine through the country, Yank. Reckon I don't want to go no furdur."

"But you will go furdur," returned Julian fiercely. "Go ahead, and remember that if I see you offer to turn right or left I put a bullet through you."

Thus urged, Mr. Dummit plied his paddle a little more, while Julian, who began to be suspicious, kept his eyes roving on either side, and occasionally to the rear.

It was lucky he did so, for he caught sight in this way of a canoe stealing out of the cedar swamp behind him, some distance to the right, with two men in it, and one of them had a gun raised and pointed at him.

"Halt!" he cried to Dummit. "You come round and get between me and your friends. If they want to shoot, you can take the bullet. Quick; git up and git."

Dummit obeyed, and began yelling:

"Don't shoot, boys, don't shoot. It's me, and a Yank's got me prisoner."

Flash! Bang!

The bullet whistled over Dummit's head as he made the lowest kind of a bow, and Julian had his hat knocked off.

Decidedly the tenants of the Everglade could shoot well.

Instantly Julian's rifle came up, and he fired two shots in rapid succession at the canoe.

One of the men threw up his arms with a yell, and fell back, the other leaped up in the canoe, and uttered a yell of a different kind.

"Shoot the cowardly Yankee," he cried. "He runs, he runs."

And Julian recognized the voice of Ned Peyton, Clara's brother, and knew that a contest lay before him.

With a kind of horror at the young man's persistence, he turned his canoe to flee and dashed away at top speed over the flooded Everglade, heading to the east in search of the Locohatchee river and the open sea.

He had resolved to trust to luck and a good repeating rifle to cut his way out.

For nearly half an hour he plied his paddle lustily and never looked back, till he was lost in a maze of islands out of whose labyrinth there seemed no straight way of escape, so that he had lost his original direction entirely.

Then he glanced back over his shoulder, and saw to his almost horror, a black canoe, with a single man in it, following him, less than half a mile behind. He had a glass in the canoe and hastily leveled it at the stranger.

It was Ned Peyton in his gray uniform, with the gold-lace trimming, all alone in a low, black canoe, with a very sharp bow, that looked as if it could paddle very fast.

The young officer was coming after him as hard as he could tear, paddling with fierce energy, and Julian was struck with a look in his face that reminded him strongly of some one he had seen before, but not Clara. The look was fierce and set, and Julian saw he must have a fight with this young man, if ever the black canoe came up with the white one.

Without more ado he dashed in his paddle, and the race began.

Every now and then he would glance back, finding the black canoe at just about the same

distance, and at last it occurred to him to try and double on his pursuer and let him go by.

He redoubled his efforts till he came to a place where several islands came close together, when he dashed into a narrow winding passage, skimmed along its turns for some distance, and finally whirled his canoe in under the shade of a live-oak draped with moss, and sat still, panting with his exertions, to watch.

In about five minutes more he heard the dash of a paddle, and the hard breathing of a man laboring with all his might.

Then Ned Peyton, in a small, beautiful modeled canoe, dug-out though it was, skimmed past the tree in the middle of the channel, his eyes fixed on the turning next ahead.

Julian waited till he had passed, when he swept out from the shelter of the tree, took the back trail to the next passage and went off by compass to the south, seeing no more of his fire-eating friend for a while.

He was compelled of course to be very cautious where he went, but after several hours' slow paddling he came at last to scenery that he recollected, though it was changed already.

He saw before him, in the Everglade, two long lines of mound, like an embankment, and realized that they were the banks of the river for which he was looking; that the water was going down, and that if he could get into the river he could find his way back to the lighthouse in all likelihood.

He dashed up to the bank, leaped out, dragged his light canoe up and over, nearly to the dark waters inside, and the next minute heard the crack of a rifle, felt a sharp pain in his shoulder, then a sensation as if all his strength had collapsed, and down he went on the bank, falling half on the canoe deck, half into the water, where he lay, realizing that he was wounded.

A moment later, he heard a shrill yell of wild triumphant meaning, and the voice of Ned Peyton became audible close to him, crying:

"Not quite such a smart Yankee, as you thought yourself my friend are you? Surrender or I'll blow your brains out."

Julian felt his senses slowly returning, for he had almost fainted and he tried to rise, but fell back again, while his young foe, who had been hiding in a thicket near by, came up with a common Enfield rifle in his hand, saying:

"Do you surrender?"

"Why of course," said Julian, with a kind of groan. "Don't you see I'm down, man? What more would you have?"

The young officer seemed a little surprised at his tone and said more kindly:

"I'm sorry for you, sir; but of course it is the fortune of war. What regiment do you belong to, and how came you here in our lines?"

Julian managed to sit up and saw a dark red hole under his left shoulder from which the blood was streaming fast, so that he said in a faint tone:

"If you don't want to be called a brute as well as a fool, you'll help me bind up my shoulder."

"Why, certainly," said Peyton, readily enough, and with that he came up to Julian, took away his rifle as a matter of military and proper precaution, at which Julian smiled in a feeble way, and then proceeded to examine the wound and stop the bleeding, which he did with considerable skill, observing:

"That's an ugly place, my Yankee friend; but you would have it. An inch lower and you would have gone up. Why didn't you halt and surrender?"

"Halt and surrender?" echoed Julian, faintly.

"Who gave you a right to halt any man?"

Ned looked at him as if amazed at the question.

"Who gave me the right? My commission, of course."

Julian could hardly help laughing in all his weakness as he asked:

"From what Government?"

"The Confederate States of America," returned Ned proudly.

"Why, you blind idiot," said Julian faintly, "there's no Confederate Government; hasn't been for nearly twenty years, since Lee's surrender at Appomattox. You're a murderer and a pirate, that's what you are."

And then he felt a black film stealing over his eyes and fell back on the bank.

CHAPTER XXIV.

HOME AGAIN.

WHEN Julian Grey came to himself a little while afterward, he found that Ned Peyton had placed him in the black dug-out canoe, laid a folded blanket under his head, and had a bottle to his lips.

The young fellow looked pale and full of pity in the moonlight, as he said:

"Here, drink this, my poor fellow, or you'll go off all of a sudden. I wish our surgeon was here. What's your name and regiment; where do you live at home? I'll write to your people for you, and tell them you died like a brave soldier."

If anything could have cured Julian, it was

just this sort of talk. He was not very severely hit, but the ball had cut a vein, and he had lost a great deal of blood.

He took a swallow from the bottle, and found the contents to be excellent whisky, which so strengthened him that he sat up, and said:

"Mr. Edward Peyton, I told you once that you're talking nonsense. I don't belong to any regiment. I'm a peaceable traveler, and your party are nothing but a gang of brigands. There is no war, and there has been none for a score of years. If you're a gentleman, now that you've fired at me from an ambush, you'll do your best to take me to some place where I can be properly nursed. My family are up Indian river."

Peyton seemed bewildered, and said half-aloud:

"The poor fellow's delirious already. I wish we had a doctor here."

"I don't want a doctor," said Julian, faintly. "Not of your kind, anyway. Take me to Jupiter Inlet Light, if you're a gentleman. I never harmed you. I might have killed you a dozen times, but I wouldn't."

Ned Peyton curled his lip rather scornfully.

"Look here, Yank," he said, "you're wounded and a prisoner; but you shouldn't abuse your license to speak by bragging. I'm called the best shot in this department."

"And I could have killed you after you missed me, just as I killed your friends. My rifle's a repeater, yours a muzzle-loader; but I wouldn't fire at you, because I knew you were only the dupe of other men. For heaven's sake take me to Jupiter Light, or I shall die on your hands here."

Peyton seemed to be considering, and at last he said:

"I'll do it, for somehow I like you. I'll take you in under a flag of truce."

"Any way you like," said Julian, feebly.

Then he took another swallow of the whisky lay back in the canoe and fell to sleep from exhaustion and shock, being dimly conscious of the fact that he was floating down the river in the canoe, with Peyton in the white craft paddling ahead.

How long he lay in this state he could not tell, but he woke up with a hot fever, burning him, his shoulder intensely painful, to find the dawn rising in the east while the tall white shaft of Jupiter Light was looming up in the air above him and he heard the puffing of a steam engine near by.

Slowly he turned his head and thought he was dreaming again.

The steam yacht Water Lily that he had thought still to be on the St. John's river at Jacksonville or somewhere in that vicinity was coming puffing up Hobe Sound into Jupiter Inlet past palms and mangroves, while on her upper deck he saw his father standing.

And close beside him in the white canoe, in the full toggery of an officer of the delunct Confederacy sat Edward Peyton, looking as if he too were bewildered.

The young man leaned over Julian and said in a low hurried tone:

"Come, Yank, I've done more than I ought to do, and the general will scold me roundly for it, I suppose, but I've not seen much service yet, and I'm soft-hearted. I'm going to leave you with your friends; but I demand your parole not to serve against us till you're exchanged."

Julian's head was whirling, but he made shift to answer:

"Anything you like. That's my father's boat. Don't go till you've seen him."

And then he seemed to drop off again and doze into insensibility, from which he did not wake till he found himself lying in a clean white bed in the old familiar cabin of the Water Lily.

He had been undressed; his shoulder had been properly bandaged, and the setting sun was shining in at the side windows of the Lily while a cool breeze blew through the saloon.

He seemed at first to be alone in a state-room formed by a screen, but when he turned his head he perceived that some one was sitting at the foot of his couch, and recognized his sister Alice.

As soon as he addressed her, she rose up, showing by her pale face and reddened eyes that she had been crying, and said softly:

"Oh Julian, are you better?"

He smiled reassuringly.

The fever of his wound, which had been

severe, had vanished, and he felt sensible and in his right mind.

"Much better, Alice," he replied. "How did I come here and who brought me?"

Alice flushed slightly.

"A very singular young man. I think he must be crazy, and it's a great pity, for he's handsome and very gentlemanly. But he must be crazy."

"Why, Alice?"

"Oh, he talks in the queerest way, and no one seems to understand what he means except papa, who humors him, I think."

"What is his name?"

"Oh, a very good name. Papa says it's from Virginia. Captain Edward Peyton."

"But what makes you think he's crazy?"

"Oh, the way he talks. He seems to think that there is a war going on here. I don't know what he means."

"But tell me, how did you come here, Alice, in the Lily?"

"Why, don't you know? Captain Brown had quite a time to bring her round from the river, but he managed to get to Mosquito Inlet at last and came the rest of the way all right. And we thought it would be nice to come after you and bring you back. But, oh, how frightened we were when we found you here wounded."

"And where is Peyton?" asked Julian.

Alice shrugged her shoulders, looking puzzled and vexed.

"On deck arguing with papa about slavery," she answered. "It seems so funny to hear him, just as if we had any slaves. That's why I think he must be crazy."

Julian felt his bandaged shoulder, and the pain seemed to have gone out of it, save when roughly touched.

"Who fixed me up so nicely?" he asked.

"Doctor Williams," she answered.

"Who's Doctor Williams?"

"Oh, I forgot, you didn't know him. He's a very nice person we met at Indian river, a settler down here. Papa says he used to be a surgeon in the rebel army before I was born, but I'm sure he does not look so old as that. Inez is very much taken with him. They're on deck now, and I heard the doctor laughing at this Captain Peyton."

Julian stirred and tried to raise himself in the bed, which he did with some difficulty, and said to Alice:

"Tell the doctor I'd like to see him."

Alice turned pale immediately.

"Oh, are you worse?"

"No, dear, nothing of the sort. I feel so much better that I want to ask the doctor if I can't get up."

Alice turned away delighted and soon returned with a grave, handsome gentleman of about forty years, who had the peculiar look of a Southern gentleman, so different from the Northern air, partly consisting in the expression and partly in the long hair and way of trimming the beard.

He was very quiet and placid in his demeanor, came in and took his patient's wrist, felt the pulse and remarked cheerfully:

"Well, I'm right glad to find you so well. You had a narrow escape from a bad wound, sir."

"Where was I hit, doctor?"

The doctor smiled good-naturedly.

"In a very singular place, and it is almost a miracle that the ball did not swerve and cut an artery or smash a bone. You must have had your arm up when you were struck, for the bullet went through close to the arm-pit and cut neither artery, bone or sinew, though you lost a good deal of blood from the veins. You ought to have it healed in a month or six weeks."

"Can I get up to-day? I feel quite strong."

"If you keep still for a while and not talk much, you can sit on deck this evening."

"Doctor, is young Peyton out there?"

The doctor's face changed.

"Yes," he said, shortly.

"Has he told you how I was hurt?"

"Yes."

The doctor seemed to deal in monosyllables and to feel angry at something.

"Does my father know it?" pursued Julian.

"Yes," answered Dr. Williams, more affably, "and I must say, sir, he's a right nice gentleman. If a man had shot my son in the same way you were shot, I believe I should have had him in irons before this if I were able to enforce my will as your father undoubtedly is."

"Doctor?"

"Well, sir?"

"Do you know anything of this young Peyton, and the people to whom he belongs?"

The doctor seemed to be uneasy at the question, for he hesitated before replying.

"Well, sir, it's hard to say. I know something of them, but only by rumor. I hear that you, on the other hand, have been in their domains and been roughly handled. I hope, sir, in that case that you will set yourself right for the honor of the South. We don't want to be represented by a mob of non-responsible banditti pretending to represent a Government that is defunct eighteen years."

"You were in the Confederate army, I believe?" said Julian, inquiringly.

"I was, sir, and I'm not ashamed of it," replied the doctor, proudly. "I saved many a life on both sides by my services, and never knew what it was to discriminate in dealing with your men or ours. But when the war ended I was in the surrender, and I've never broken my parole since that day."

"Did you ever know General Peyton, father of this young man?"

"Yes, well. I knew that he went off through the country with a band of horse that he called the Invincibles, and got away down into these swamps of the Everglades, and that he never surrendered. But I never knew till to-day that he claimed in this desolate corner to represent the Confederacy."

"Have you seen him since the war?"

The doctor hesitated.

"I beg your pardon. I must ask you to excuse me answering the question. I'd rather not. It is no affair of mine to tell about other men who think differently from me. You asked me if you could get up. Certainly, I'll help you."

Julian took the hint and ceased to question the doctor, who evidently knew more than he cared to tell about the secret of the Everglade.

He rose from his bed with a little stiffness and pain, threw on some loose trousers and slippers, with a long dressing robe and a smoking-cap, and was conducted by the doctor to the upper deck of the yacht, where he found the whole party assembled, and realized that they had left the vicinity of Jupiter Inlet Light-house and were lying in the middle of another stretch of water at anchor in the sunset.

Young Peyton, still in that ridiculous uniform, was engaged in a close conversation with Alice Grey and Inez Zuniga, who seemed to be wonderfully fascinated with his handsome face and winning manners, while Colonel Grey and Julian's mother were watching them from under an awning a little way off, apparently well pleased at what was going on.

Julian's appearance was the signal for a general outcry of wonder and expostulation at his rashness, while the girls set out an arm chair for him, and his father and mother hung round him as if he were a baby.

When he was fairly established at last, he looked round for Peyton, and saw the young man, with a strange look on his face, half-puzzled, half-pleased, surveying him, and apparently hesitating whether to advance or not.

Julian smiled and held out his hand.

"I bear no malice," he said. "You thought you were right, Mr. Peyton."

Peyton took the proffered hand and replied, with a smile that was quite cordial:

"I'm right glad I didn't hurt you any more, sir; and now that I see you're on the fair way to recovery, I must tear myself away. You know we have our duties to attend to, and though they are painful, they must be attended to at any hazard. Young ladies, I bid you good-day."

He raised his hat, and was going off to the side of the boat, when Colonel Grey rose and called out to him, in tones of some agitation:

"Young man, Mr. Peyton, one moment, if you please."

Peyton turned rather stiffly.

"Sir? Be expeditious, if you please, for my orders are positive to return, and I have been absent from my post already too long."

Colonel Grey went up to him and laid his hand on his arm.

"Why do you persist in not believing me?" he asked. "You are willfully blind."

Peyton drew himself up haughtily.

"Because, sir, to believe you is to disbelieve my own father. I prefer to trust him to one who is a stranger and an enemy."

"Then you believe Dr. Williams?" asked

the colonel eagerly. "He was in your army when it existed, and can corroborate what I say in every respect."

Ned shook his head impatiently.

"My dear sir, you are wasting breath. I have my orders, and till they are countermanded by General Peyton, my commanding officer, they must stand. When he tells me to lay down my arms I'll do it, and not before."

"No one wants you to lay down your arms," said Colonel Grey earnestly. "There's no war, no need of arms. All I ask of you is to believe what I say, and induce your father to remove his family out of that barbarous region into civilization. You have told me of your sister. Why should she be penned up in the midst of pestilential swamps when she might be on the same footing as my daughter and Miss Zuniga?"

Peyton seemed to be impressed with his words, for he uttered a sigh as he answered:

"I know that, sir, and I thank you for speaking of it. We of the South have many hardships to undergo before we conquer our independence, but we are resolved on enduring them all rather than bend."

"At least," said Colonel Grey earnestly, "let me exact of you one pledge. If the worst comes to the worst and your men will not disperse unless force is brought against them, I ask you to send your sister and the non-combatant women and children to some safe place. If you will intrust them to my care, I will answer for their safety."

Peyton bowed politely.

"I am very grateful for your offer, and will very gladly accept it for my sister, colonel. From what you have told me, I gather that the general may have been deceived by false news as to our successes in the North, and it is just possible he may be wrong. If I find he is, I will bring my sister myself to your care, since you say we are relatives in some way or other."

Julian pricked up his ears.

"Relatives?" he muttered. "How?"

He had no time to ask more when Peyton, with a last wave of the hat, went over the side of the Water Lily and a few moments afterwards he saw him shooting away over the waters of the inlet in his low black canoe toward a darkly wooded shore he had never seen before.

"Where are we?" he asked his father as the colonel came back to him.

"In Lake Worth, some distance from Jupiter. You have slept a long time since the doctor gave you the opiate, Julian."

"How long, father?"

"Two whole days and part of a third?"

"And Jupiter Light-House? Did you see Stevens?"

"Who is Stevens?"

"The keeper, sir?"

"No, we had no time after you were taken on board. Do you know, Julian, we came in the very nick of time to save you from death."

"I realize it, sir."

"I don't mean merely for your wound but from something else. There's a mystery here and this Dr. Williams will not unravel it though I am well satisfied that he knows what it is."

Julian looked up at his father.

"I can tell you," he said. "I have been there and all through their kingdom of the smoke."

The colonel looked very much surprised.

"You have been there in the interior. Good heavens, boy, do you know the risk you've run? I fear it is going to take the whole power of the Government to crush these people."

Julian smiled.

"Why, how many do you think there are?"

"I don't know, but young Peyton tells me they have a regular army corps of three divisions with a numerous artillery and that they are ready to defy fifty thousand men if need be."

"My dear father, he was only boasting. I don't know but what he believes his own boasts; but I don't believe there are a hundred men in the whole Everglade and their arms are old and rusty. I've seen them all."

CHAPTER XXV.

HUNTING THE MYSTERY.

JULIAN'S avowal was followed by a long and interesting interview between him and his father and mother, at which he learned much that he had never known before, as to the relations that had once subsisted between his

father and the mysterious General Peyton, whom he had not yet seen.

He learned for the first time that his mother was a cousin of the outlawed chief—for outlawed he was now in every sense of the term, by his own act—and that some tie of obligation also subsisted between his father and Peyton by which alone the latter had been restrained from inflicting summary vengeance on young Peyton when it was ascertained that he had shot Julian, in such an unprovoked manner.

What that tie was, Colonel Grey would not tell Julian, but the result of their conference was a return of the yacht to Indian river, and a long cruise up and down the inlet while the young man's wound was healing, and he regaining his health, an operation which required about a month in that delightful climate.

When at last he was well and strong again, the prow of the Water Lily was turned to the north, and she steamed through Mosquito Inlet and inside of Anastasia Island to St. Augustine, where the ladies were left behind, and the yacht once more set out for the South, with no one on board but the colonel, Julian, Dr. Williams, and the four men who composed the crew of the Water Lily.

They held their course through Mosquito Inlet and Indian river early in the month of February, and sighted Jupiter Inlet Light one evening, when the thin streaks of vapor in the south gave token of another storm coming, when they ran in under shelter of the island and anchored in the inside channel.

They were welcomed with every mark of astonishment by old Joe and Stevens, who had seen the yacht pass a month before and had wondered that it had not stopped at the light-house.

Then Stevens told his story of what had passed since Julian's departure.

He and Joe had seen the young man driven back by sea and tide when he attempted to make his way into the open ocean, and had given him up for lost when they saw him carried up the Locohatchee by the advancing tide-wave.

But one strange thing had happened since that event, and that was the coming of the Water Lily and her departure to the south.

"And since that time," said Stevens, "we have never seen a vestige of the wreckers or received a single visit from Alligator Ike and his men. They seem to have vanished utterly, and they have brought back my skiff which they took away, and left it anchored in the channel. I think they have gone for good."

"How do you know they are not hiding and watching as they used to do?" asked Julian.

"If they were, one of us would have seen them. We have been off fishing up and down the coast, and no one has molested us."

"Then they have taken the alarm and broken up the settlement," said Colonel Grey, thoughtfully. "I feared they would do that, and I want to see the chief once more, if only to do him justice; for he has been greatly wronged."

Julian did not understand what was said, but he readily agreed to the advisability of trying to take the Water Lily up the Locohatchee and exploring the Everglade as soon as the coming storm should have heaped up the waters to a sufficient height to make navigation safe.

They made the vessel snug for the night, and in the morning the storm burst on them with terrific violence, an exact repetition of the tempest in which the wreckers had gone to work a month before.

Julian watched from the light-house lantern, but saw no signs of any vessel going ashore, and no signals of distress disturbed the night.

Three days the storm lasted, and on the fourth the clouds began to break, and Colonel Grey looked over the brown sea of waters that covered all the Everglade inland, and said:

"It's time we were off, Captain Jim. Get up the steam as soon as you can."

The wind was blowing from the south, the waves outside rolling mountain high, and quite a heavy sea was running into the inlet when Captain Jim began to fire up, and the white steam to whistle from the pipe of the little yacht.

Half an hour later they saw the tide-wave coming to enter the Locohatchee, and started their engines to catch it, in which they had complete success.

Then away went the Water Lily on the crest of the rapidly skimming wave, keeping

her screw going as fast as she could to retain control of her movements, and hour after hour the same mad rush continued, till Captain Jim in the pilot-house said to Julian uneasily:

"If we run on a snag, Mr. Julian, I wouldn't give much for this boat's bottom, or our lives either."

"I never saw a snag here," replied Julian, who stood by him watching the river. "When the rush stops, Jim, we must head her out over the bank, and then we'll have a hard time to get her back, if the water falls as we return."

On they went for another hour, when the sweep of the tide seemed getting slower.

Julian began to recognize the country, and saw in the far distance the low line of dark green that told of the cedar-swamp barrier, and over it floated a curl of black smoke.

The Water Lily was turned and went over the bank, just scraping her bottom, and then steamed away over the Everglade toward the distant smoke as hard as she could go.

It was essential to get through all their exploring in a hurry, if they expected to return that way while the water was up, and they lost no time among the islands, but kept to the open water, steering southwest.

Within three hours of leaving the river, and while the sun was still high in the heavens, though it was afternoon, Julian cried:

"There's the opening, father. Now we're in for it."

Colonel Grey got out his glass and looked hard and long at the opening in the cedars.

Stevens, who had come with them, shuddered, and said in a low voice:

"That's the place where all my persecutions were started. Pray God we don't get the worst of it this time also."

The party on board the Water Lily were only eight in number, including Dr. Williams; but they were armed with repeating rifles, and had no fears but what they could hold their own, while the boat floated.

On they went, steering straight for the opening, and by Dr. Williams's advice, they blew the whistle as they came, and hoisted a white flag in the bow of the boat as a sign of truce.

But neither the whistle nor the noise of the steam escaping produced any response in the stillness, and the little yacht sailed on into the opening, her crew seeing no one.

Julian stood in the pilot-house, and scanned the scene eagerly. There were the bold, bluff-like islands, the cone of the volcano belching its clouds of smoke, the houses still standing; but not a vestige of humanity to be seen anywhere.

The Water Lily steamed round to what had been General Peyton's house, and there stood the tall flagstaff, with a flag that Julian had never seen before floating there.

Dr. Williams looked at it, and his face flushed with some strange feeling as he said to Colonel Grey:

"We used to love that flag very well once on a time, colonel. How different it looks now!"

They hauled up in front, and Julian went ashore in a canoe with Dr. Williams.

They found the house deserted, as if it had been but recently occupied, and Julian saw that it had been the home of considerable luxury of a strange character.

The furniture was of all kinds, very few pieces alike, and he recognized from peculiarities in the make, that most of it had come from the cabins of ships.

Clara Peyton's harp stood in a corner as if it had been lately used, while a heap of music was marked with her name.

It gave Julian a strange thrill to see all this, and when he came on a still more tangible token of her presence in a glove that still retained the impress of her little hand, he picked it up and hid it in his breast.

Then he hunted all over the house and grounds for some evidence of the presence of people, but found none beyond the articles they had laid down in a hurry, when they left the house.

At the back of the white house, which was square in shape and surrounded by a cool and broad veranda, was a long low range of small log huts, and Julian asked:

"What are those, I wonder?"

"The negro quarters," said Williams thoughtfully.

"I've heard of this before, Grey, by rumors, but I didn't believe it possible."

"Believe what possible?"

"That they had a community down here, hidden in the Everglades, where they kept everything just as it was before the war."

"Is this the way it was?"

"Exactly. The house in front; the quarters in the rear. The old times are all gone now."

Julian looked thoughtfully at the house.

"They seemed to be very pleasant times to me when I saw them."

"Saw them?" echoed Williams. "Why, boy, they were over when you were a baby."

"I mean here. You know I got in here alone and hid myself in the plantation, so as to see all that went on in and around the house. It looked to me very pleasant."

"It was," said Williams with a sigh, "very pleasant indeed. But it's all over now. Never mind."

He shook off the momentary feeling of sad recollection, and began to bustle about.

"These people have quit the place in a right smart hurry," he observed. "I wonder where they've gone to. Let's go back to the steamer."

They paddled back and continued their voyage to the next island, which they found equally deserted and empty.

On the third, after a search as they were going away, they saw a rustling in the bushes, and as Julian pointed a rifle toward it a startled voice cried out:

"Don't shoot, marse, don't shoot! Bress de Lawd! is ye de Linkum gemmen?"

Colonel Grey burst out laughing.

"The same old cry of twenty years ago. Come out here, you black idiot. Who are you?"

Out of the bushes crept a boy of about sixteen, black as jet, with wildly rolling eyes and white teeth chattering with fear as in an ague-fit.

He was dressed in a check shirt and trousers, with a brimless hat of palmetto fiber, which he pulled off and fingered nervously, as he rolled his eyes from one to the other, dumb as an oyster, quite paralyzed with fear.

"Who are you?" repeated Colonel Grey.

"Ise—Ise—nobody, marse—only Jupe Peyton, marse. Fo' de Lawd, don't whip! I done thought you was de Linkum gemmen, marse. Don't whip me, marse; Ise nebber do it no more!"

"I won't whip you," returned Grey kindly. "My poor boy, how came you here? Don't you know that the war's over and your people free, long, long ago?"

Jupe allowed his eyes to roll more wildly than ever as he stammered:

"Golly, marse! oh, don't—don't—don't fool a pore nigger, marse! Is you reely de Linkum gemmen? Reely, truly?"

Grey pointed to the little steam yacht, with the Stars and Stripes flying, and asked:

"Don't you know the old flag, Jupe? Your fellows used to know it well twenty years ago, and it's as bright as ever."

Then Jupe suddenly burst into a tremendous yell of triumph, and began to dance up and down.

"Bress de Lawd! we's free!" he yelled. "Hi! all you niggers, git up and bu'st you gizzards a-bawlin'. We's free—free! We's free!"

To Julian, who had never seen or heard of the old slavery days, the scene was ludicrous in the extreme; but both in Colonel Grey and Doctor Williams it seemed to arouse painful thoughts, for they both stood looking at Jupe as if they felt sorry for him.

When the transports of the boy had cooled down somewhat, Grey asked him:

"Who was your master, Jupe?"

"Marse Gin'ral Peyton, sah—oh golly, ain't I glad! Yah! yah! yah!"

"Where is he now?"

Jupe stopped laughing and his eyes began to roll again, as he said, soberly:

"Oh, marse, don't you go near Marse Peyton. He pow'ful bad man, he am. Kill you jess quick's a flash."

"And where is he, Jupe?"

Jupe looked all round uneasily.

"Ise afraid to tell, marse."

"Why, Jupe?"

"Marse Peyton find out; he whip me to deff."

"But I've told you you're free. He's no right to put so much as a finger on you."

"Can't help dat, marse. Know what he did to Sol Armistead."

"And what was that, Jupe?"

"Sol Armistead he done told de boys how he

hearn tell dat we was all free, and ole Marse Peyton he take and tie him up and call all de niggers to look what he got fo' talk freedom to 'em."

"And what did he get, Jupe?"

Jupe's eyes dilated with horror.

"Fo' de lawd, marse, dey juss cut him nigh to pieces, and he hollerin' like mad all de time, till he bruk down and begged. Den dey let him down, and none of us ain't nebber dared do no sich t'ing again."

The colonel looked at Williams gravely.

The doctor nodded gloomily, as he said:

"Yes, I see it's true. I'd heard rumors of it, but I didn't believe it. He must be a regular obstinate fool, this Peyton."

Colonel Grey set his lips firmly.

"I'll beat him yet, though, see if I don't. Here, Jupe, what has become of all your people? When did they go?"

"Dis mawnin' 'arly, marse, when de sailor fellies done puff de smoke. I'se hearn 'em say de Linkum boats was a-comin' and dey jist bu'sted deirselves a-gittin' up and gittin' like dem were skeered to deff."

Jupe showed his white teeth in evident enjoyment as he said this and Williams asked:

"Which way did they go, boy?"

Jupe looked at him and his eyes began to roll again as he said to Colonel Grey:

"Marse, is you shuah, *shuah* dat you is de Linkum gemmen, truly, all of you?"

Williams burst out laughing.

"The poor boy knows my speech the first word I utter, colonel. No, Jupe, I'm not a Linkum gemman, as you call it. I'm a regular old full-fleged reb, or rather I was so twenty years ago. But that's all over long since. I'm a friend of your master and a friend to the colonel here, and I want to find your master and bring him back under the old flag."

Jupe listened with obvious incredulity, for when Williams had finished the negro's face took on the look of stolid stupidity which is always the protection of enslaved races, and he said sullenly:

"Dunno nuffin 'bout Marse Peyton. Dunno nuffin 'bout whar he is."

"Yes, you do, Jupe," said Williams kindly.

"Yes, you do. You're frightened for fear we'll give you up to him; but I promise you we won't. We've come here to set you all free. Do you understand what I mean? All of you. You are free now, but you want to set the rest free too, don't you?"

Jupe seemed to hesitate, but his fears got the best of him, for he answered:

"Dunno nuffin 'bout Marse Peyton."

The colonel laid his hand on Williams's arm.

"Let me deal with him, doctor. See here, Jupe, I'm a Linkum gemman, as you call it, and I want to find your master. I'll put you on board my boat and no one shall hurt you if you'll tell the truth. Where has he gone?"

Jupe's countenance brightened.

"I'll tell you, marse. He done gone in de Stonewall, I reckon, and de hands is all in de swamp wid de 'gator men."

CHAPTER XXVI.

JUPE, THE PILOT.

"With the 'gator men? And where are they?"

It was Julian spoke, and Jupe pointed off to the northeast in the cedar swamp.

"Out dar, marse. Injuns and debbils of all sort. Most as bad as the coast men."

"And who are the coast men?"

Jupe shuddered and rolled his eyes.

"Dem's the worstest of all, marse. Dey kills niggers when dem tries to run away."

"And where's Miss Clara and Master Ned?" the young man asked, flushing slightly.

Jupe stared and grinned.

"What you know 'bout Miss Clarry, marse?"

"Never mind, answer my question?"

"Miss Clarry and Marse Ned done gone wid old marse in de Stonewall, marse."

"Is the Stonewall a sailing vessel?"

Jupe scratched his head puzzled.

"Dunno, marse."

"I mean is she a steamer or not?"

"Steamer, marse? Dunno."

"I mean, has she sails or does she steam?"

"Sails? Yah! yah! Golly, yes, marse. She sail like a witch, old marse say."

"How many masts has she?"

"Masts? Dunno, marse. Reckon she done got none. She's a schooner, marse, so de sailor men calls her."

"Does she carry your flag?" asked Grey.

Jupe shook his head.

"No, marse, she done got no flag when she come hyar. She jist have red, white and blue, sewed togeder. Ain't no flag like ours. No shape to it."

Here Williams interrupted again. He had been listening with great apparent interest.

"Would you know the flag if you saw it?"

"Yes, marse, I reckon."

Williams drew on the sand a flag with three perpendicular divisions.

"Look here. Is that the way the colors are put in the flag?"

Jupe's countenance shone and he nodded several times, ejaculating:

"How debbil you know dat? You see um?"

"It's the French flag," said Williams in a low tone to Grey. "I've heard of that schooner often on the coast, and she has been chased by our revenue vessels more than once. No one ever succeeded in finding what became of her. If we can go out the way she does we may unravel the whole of this mystery. You ask the boy. He won't trust me."

"Look here, Jupe," said the colonel, "did you ever go out in the Stonewall?"

Jupe nodded.

"Yes, marse. I done gone in her all de way to de sea, one't, and dey send me back wid de coast-men in de canoe."

"Would you know the way she goes?"

Jupe nodded and pointed southwest.

"Dat de way, marse. De water ebber so deep, and no alligators dere. All salt."

"Then come aboard our boat and we'll try and catch the Stonewall," said the colonel.

Jupe grinned from ear to ear, and very willingly followed them on board the little steam-yacht, when they steamed away toward the southeast.

As they passed the different islands on the way the houses stood open, and a great many fowls were straying about, while on one long, low tract of ground, several miles square, a herd of cattle were grazing.

All round there the game was plentiful, and so tame that Colonel Grey remarked:

"They must have done very little hunting here."

"I feel sure of that," said Williams thoughtfully. "Whatever the motives that induced Peyton to take up his abode here, his colony must have been plentifully supplied. No man need starve in Florida while he has gun and rod."

They steamed rapidly on till Jupe said:

"Yondah de channel, marse, between de two islands dar."

The islands he referred to were the largest they had yet seen, of the character common on the coast of Florida, low sand-spits, formed of disintegrated coral, and covered with palms and orange-groves of the wild variety of fruit.

Williams, who was an old orange-planter, pointed out several groves where the fruit had evidently been budded with sweeter varieties, showing that the colonists had not been idle, and then they passed into a dark channel between the two islands that ran straight on for several miles.

They continued on, the islands becoming larger and less frequent as they advanced, till it seemed as if they were coming to the open sea, when Julian, who was looking over the bow, noticed that the water was quite clear again and seemed to be shoaling rapidly.

A little later they came on green grass in the bottom, and the way of the yacht was stopped, for it became evident that they had lost the channel and run into overflowed prairie.

Jupe was appealed to, and he began to stare about in all directions, till at last he pointed due east, to an island where grew a very conspicuous lone palm tree.

He declared the channel to be on the other side of that island, while they could see the tops of weeds between them and the palm, showing that the water must be very shallow there and not safe for their boat.

Under these circumstances Julian and the doctor took a canoe and pushed for the island, while the Water Lily made a large circuit to the north to reach the channel again if she could.

The two adventurers paddled on till they came to the grass, when they found themselves in less than two feet of water, and finally were obliged to get out and wade to shore, dragging the canoe.

Looking round they saw the yacht making

a wide detour, frequently stopping, turning and backing, and Williams observed:

"I'm afraid she'll have a right smart chance of trouble to get out, Mr. Grey. I've heard that the channels are very blind here."

They left the canoe on the shore and walked across the island with their guns. There was no shade, and the sun was hot to the feet, even through their boots.

On the other side they found that the negro had told them the truth.

A deep channel, with a rapid current, had eaten its way into the sand by the side of the island, and the water rushed out to sea at the rate of four miles an hour.

They looked for the yacht, and saw her far away up to the north, seemingly stuck fast, not far from the very channel they saw, which they could trace in a dark line across the flooded everglade.

Williams began to look grave.

"I'm afraid," he said, "she's going to have trouble. The water must be falling all over the country with the ebb tide, and I know most of this is said to be prairie country in the dry season of the year."

They watched the yacht for some time, and saw her back away and charge for the current several times, each time sticking fast, within a short distance of the channel that looked so inviting.

At last she backed away, and went off to the north when Julian exclaimed:

"Heavens! They can't get through. I wish we had not come here. We can't get back to the Water Lily to-night."

"No great hardship in that, Mr. Grey," said his friend philosophically. "We can sleep on this dry sand without much suffering, and the climate is simply perfection."

They watched the yacht receding to the north till she became a mere white speck, and then the setting sun admonished them to prepare for supper, if they expected any thing to eat.

Wild ducks and herons, with cranes and a hundred different varieties of waterfowl were so plentiful and tame that they had no trouble in providing a supper and the island proved so full of driftwood that a fire was lighted without difficulty when they sat down by their canoe to enjoy a supper *al fresco*.

As yet neither was alarmed, and conversation did not flag, but when they had eaten their fill and were smoking their pipes, Williams said in a rather sober manner:

"Grey, what shall we do if the steamer is stuck fast and can't get into the channel?"

"I'm sure I don't know," answered Julian with a rather blank expression. "Do you think there's any danger of it?"

"Frankly, I do. I wish we hadn't trusted that stupid nigger. They're such liars."

"But he didn't lie to us. Here's the channel, where he said it was."

"But why didn't he keep us in it?"

"Because he was not a competent pilot, I suppose. But if the yacht once gets into it again, the current will carry her down to us."

Williams shook his head and looked very uneasy, but made no further remark for some time, till the night had come on and the stars were out.

Then he pointed over to the east, where a light glowed low down by the horizon, and said to Julian:

"That's Jupiter Inlet Light. We are less than forty miles off; for that is only visible for thirty-eight on a level."

They stayed up by the fire, talking and smoking, till Julian, who had been looking off toward the channel, noticed a moving light and called Williams's attention to it.

The doctor rose up, and they left the fire to go down, while they inspected the light.

After a little watching they discovered that it came from another island down the channel, about a mile off on the opposite side of the water, and it seemed to be moving to and fro on the shore.

Williams touched Julian's arm.

"There they are," he said, in a low voice. "I've been expecting it ever since the yacht left us. They are the men Jupe called the coast guard. I've heard of them before, and they're bad fellows."

"But they can't come near us," said Julian.

The doctor looked back and pointed to the fire which they had lighted, and which was still clearly distinguishable not far off.

"They've seen our fire," he said, "and they must be pretty bold or they wouldn't show that light so plainly."

"Do you think they are coming to attack us?"

"I do."

"Then it's time we showed them what a Winchester rifle can do in good hands."

The doctor seemed uneasy.

"Confound it, Grey; I don't like to fight them. They're my old friends after all, if they are making fools of themselves now. I think we can manage to parley with them. They'll understand me, better than they'll you. I'll tell you what you do: Take the canoe and leave me here by the fire, unarmed. I'm a surgeon, and surgeons are safe, all the world over. I'll let them take me, if need be. You keep out of the way, and if I am hurt or killed, make your way to the yacht. After that I won't oppose any measures you can take against them."

Julian was affected by the self-sacrifice of the generous Southerner, and answered:

"No, no, that won't do. You shall run no sort of danger, unless I share it. The canoe will hold us both, and I will not go unless you go with me. I've a better proposition."

"What is it?"

"Let us both go, and leave dummies by the fire, to see if they will shoot at them. If they do, they are enemies; and you need have no more scruples about shooting back at them."

"Agreed," said Williams, rather reluctantly; "but I'm afraid that's just what they are."

"Then there's no earthly need of sacrificing a life to find it out," said Julian. "I've had enough of being shot at for nothing, and I propose to defend my life hereafter."

They went back to the canoe which they had left hidden in the long grass, dragged it to a spot where it could easily be launched, and which at the same time commanded a view of the fire and channel beyond.

Then they took off their hats and coats, arranged them on sticks by the fire to give the impression at a distance of two sleeping men; and crawled off through the grass to their post of ambush.

They had not waited their ten minutes when they saw a boat out in the stream pulling hard against the current for the island.

CHAPTER XXVII.

HOT WORK.

THE boat could be seen crawling along like a black insect, advancing very slowly; and as it came near Julian recognized in it the same four-oar that had chased him, a month before, on the Lake of the Smoke.

Having no glass, he could not see whether Ned Peyton was in it, but as it came closer it seemed to him as if the figure in the stern were larger and heavier than Ned.

On came the boat, the oarsmen working hard and making very little progress, while when they attempted to cross the stream diagonally they were driven back so fast that they had to abandon the effort and continue on a straight course against the current.

In this way they at last arrived opposite the fire, and came driving down toward it, the boat being swept some distance below it, when a single man was seen to leave the stern, land, and come over the sand toward the dying embers.

"Good Heavens!" whispered Williams. "It is he himself. It is the same exactly."

"Who?" asked Julian, in the same cautious tone. "Whom do you mean?"

"General Peyton!" was the reply. "I'd know his figure anywhere."

Julian looked and saw a tall, heavy-built man, with long, dark hair and beard, coming to the fire. He seemed to be dressed in some sort of uniform, but carried no gun.

He was less than a hundred yards away, and the fire happened to blaze up under a puff of wind as he came to it, revealing his features.

Julian started as he recognized Alligator Ike, no longer clad in the rough habiliments of a hunter, but in the uniform of a soldier, with a rich belt and sword on.

Alligator Ike was General Peyton.

The general came up to the fire, stirred the dummy figures with his foot, and the two listeners saw him turn away with an oath of angry impatience.

Then he turned and called into the darkness:

"Hullo, Yanks, where are you? You needn't be so scary about your precious skins. No one wants to hurt you."

"Keep still," whispered Williams. "It's only a trick to get us to speak out. That man means mischief, or he wouldn't come out in that uniform. Let him shout."

Again Alligator Ike repeated his summons, and when it was not answered, he called to the men in the boat:

"Come round the other end of the island. They're hid somewhar hyar. Be lively now."

They saw the boat shoot down the stream to the end of the island, turn out of the channel into the still water and run on shore, when four men came running over the island, and Williams said:

"Now's our time to escape. Get into the stream and we can run out to sea."

They crawled back through the long grass to the canoe, shoved it off, and swept silently away over the flooded Everglade, hearing the cries of the men on the island to each other as they beat up the cover in the most thorough and systematic way.

No one noticed them till they had come to the edge of the channel, when they heard a yell:

"Thar's the Yanks! Give 'em blazes, boys."

Bang, bang, went four guns as fast as they could be fired, and the sound of snapping wood told that the canoe was hit.

Then Doctor Williams yelled:

"Ye fools, you're firing on your own men."

To Julian he added in a low voice:

"Paddle for all you're worth. Out with her now!"

They shot out into the stream, and went away as hard as they could paddle, at the rate of eight or nine miles an hour, followed by a yell from the men on the bank, who set off running after them as hard as they could tear.

But the island was nearly two miles long, and the swift canoe, aided by the current, had a great advantage over the runners.

As they passed the end of the long sand-spit the doctor cried:

"Quick, Grey, turn her in! Maybe we can get their boat. There she lies."

There lay the four oar on the beach without a keeper and it was the work of a moment for Williams to leap on shore as they grazed a point, shove off the boat into the current, and go floating down the stream after Julian, before the enemy could reach the point by nearly two minutes.

When they came there and realized how they were trapped, they began to fire at the boat with such vengeful aim that the doctor jumped overboard on one side, and hung on the gunnel to make a shield for himself; and while in this position five holes were put into the bottom of the boat, before the enemy ceased firing.

Then Julian slackened his pace, picked up his coadjutor, and dropped down the stream again, leaving the scuttled boat to fill and float down-stream, gunwale to the water. So far they were safe; but what dangers lay ahead of them neither knew.

Within five minutes from the time they set the boat adrift they were skimming past the place where they had first seen the moving light.

It was on the shore of a sandy island, covered with dense thickets of oranges, out of which the tall fronds of the palm trees stood at intervals.

In a curve of the shore burned a bright fire, surrounded with people; and as they swept by, Julian recognized, with a throb of his heart that he could not subdue, the figures of women, amid which towered Ned Peyton, easily distinguished by his light and brilliant uniform.

The people were standing round the fire, or down by the shore, gazing over the water, and as the canoe shot into sight round the bend there was a loud yell from the men, in the shrill tone which Julian had heard during the assault on the light-house and which made him ask Williams:

"What makes your men yell so, instead of shouting?"

"The yell's heard further and it scares more folks than the shout," was the answer.

Then Julian hailed the shore as they swept by:

"Ho! Captain Peyton! Ahoy!"

"Well," cried the young officer, coming out into the firelight and waving his hand for the men to remain quiet, "what is it?"

"You'd better send up for your men," cried Julian. "We've stole their boat and they're alone on the island. Hello!"

"Well?" cried Peyton again.

"The war's over long ago," cried Julian as loud as he could bawl. "Any man that fires a shot at us is liable to be hung for murder!"

He drew out the last word on purpose to make it plain to the people round the fire, and Dr. Williams aided him by yelling:

"Halloo, there! You all go home! There is no Confederacy. It went up twenty years ago-o-o!"

Then the canoe swept out of sight without having elicited a shot, and the doctor remarked:

"That will set them thinking, Grey. That sort of thing broke us up in '65 more than your men's fire. It was our deserters finished us."

They pursued their way down the rapid current unmolested for some little time longer, when another island appeared in front, and Julian caught sight of the tall naked masts of a schooner lying on the other side, behind some trees.

"That's their vessel," he whispered to Williams. "Now, if we can only get to sea this way we can come back and unravel this whole affair."

Williams nodded gloomily. Julian could see that his heart was not very much in the task of exposing people who had once been his friends and comrades in arms.

They swept down past the island, keeping a course in the middle of the stream, and as they turned the end saw a very beautifully and swiftly-modeled schooner, that seemed to be a yacht lying moored by what looked very like a dock, with a boat riding by her gangway-ladder.

"That must be the Stonewall Jackson," said the doctor; "but what puzzles me is how she got up here against this current and how she has evaded notice all these years."

They allowed the canoe to drift down with the stream and lay down so as to conceal their bodies, for they could see figures moving over the rail of the schooner, and did not want to provoke notice.

But the lookout on the vessel was not to be so easily deceived, and before they had been in sight a full minute a hail came over the water:

"Qui va la?" (Who goes there?)

"It's a Frenchman," whispered Williams.

They kept quite still, and the hail was repeated more menacingly, followed by a flash and the report of a rifle.

The gunwale of the canoe cracked as a bullet went through it; but as both men lay still, the little craft continued to drift down the river at the same pace as before.

Then they heard a great shouting on the deck of the Frenchman, the trampling of feet, and saw men rushing into the boat.

Julian was about rising up, when Doctor Williams whispered energetically:

"Lie still. D'ye want to be shot?"

"We'll be shot anyhow, I think," said Julian.

"No, sir. Wait till the boat's between us and them for a shield, and then it's time to run."

Julian saw the soundness of the advice at once, for no more shots were aimed at the canoe after that.

The people of the schooner seemed to be in doubt whether it were indeed an empty canoe, and sent out their own boat to look at it and investigate.

By the time the boat was within hailing distance another island had come between canoe and schooner, and Williams whispered:

"Now, Grey, let 'em have it. Darn a frog-eating Frenchman, anyhow."

So saying, and lying on his back in the canoe, he pointed his Winchester at the approaching boat, which seemed to pull six oars, and fired as fast as he could work the lever.

The effect was immediate. The crew of the boat fell into disorder, tumbled over each other, and stopped rowing with a tremendous racket of talk, while Julian jumped up, seized his paddle, and made the spray fly as he went.

A wild, aimless fire of pistol-shots was returned from the boat as it turned round and pulled away up-stream, while Dr. Williams emptied every chamber of his rifle, and followed it up with Julian's as fast as he could fire over the heads of the amazed Frenchmen.

"Thar!" he said, his Southern accent becoming broad in his excitement, as the boat fled round a curve. "Reckon you'll think a heap before you come down on us again. Hey, Grey, how we would have warmed you fellows if we'd only had these things twenty years ago."

He seemed to be bubbling over with joyful excitement, as he went on:

"It's not my business to fight, but to heal; but oh, I can just everlastingly sock it to 'em when I see a Frenchman. Darn 'em, we might have had our own way if they'd done as they ought to. I hate 'em."

And he began to reload the rifles, muttering anathemas on the Frenchmen, which were only partially understood by Julian, who did not remember the bitter feelings engendered by the strife of long ago.

When the doctor had reloaded, he took up his paddle and helped Grey to make a rapid progress down the stream, keeping in the middle of the current till the moon rose in her third quarter, and they saw before them a small wooded island, which offered such excellent shelter that they ran in to the shore, dragged the canoe among the bushes, and threw themselves down, tired out, to catch some sleep.

When they woke up next morning the sun was shining through the branches and a fresh breeze blowing, under which a large schooner was passing the island with a press of sail.

CHAPTER XXVIII. IN THE CHANNEL.

FOR a moment Julian rubbed his eyes and thought he was dreaming, then pulled the arm of Williams who lay by him.

They sat up in the bushes and watched the vessel in the channel, and she had got nearly abreast, when the creaking of her blocks awoke them.

She was a large schooner, with a low, sharp, black hull, a gold streak, and no figure-head, while the spread of her booms and the huge size of her sails gave her a very yacht-like appearance.

As her jib-boom came abreast, they saw she had every sail hoisted that would draw, and the clear water curled up from her keen bows, as if under the stem of a steamer, while her decks seemed to be crowded with people.

At the peak of her mainsail floated the French tricolor, but the people on her decks were dressed in gray, and all carried weapons.

Dr. Williams pulled Julian down as he put up his head in curiosity.

"That's the same," he said. "Don't show your head, or they'll shoot. They're mad as hornets to-day."

Julian felt the wisdom of the advice, and kept himself hid while the schooner passed; but he watched her decks closely, in the hope of getting a sight of Clara Peyton, whom he expected to see on board.

He saw the giant form of Alligator Ike, or General Peyton, whichever he might be called, on the quarter-deck of the vessel, as she passed.

The general was talking earnestly to a man in the sailor's dress of a Frenchman, a little natter and more gaudy than that of the sober British or Americans; and as he talked he gesticulated much, as if arguing.

But neither Clara nor her brother were to be seen on the schooner, and she swept down the channel at a rapid rate, without any notice being taken of the canoe on the shore, hidden as it was in the bushes.

As soon as she had fairly gone out of sight Williams observed:

"Now we've got the best of them, Grey. They can never turn and come back in this narrow channel, and they've given us the weather gage."

"Where are they going, I wonder?" said Julian, thoughtfully. "All the armed men are in the schooner. It looks like an expedition."

Williams smiled rather sadly.

"You're young and green, boy. You've never seen that sort of thing before. It's a fight. They know that their secret is discovered at last, and they are going to hide their tracks if they can. If they had caught us they would probably have killed us to save the secret, but they must have caught sight of the Water Lily, I think."

"Well, what shall we do?" said Julian.

"Wait for the yacht; she'll be down soon or the schooner would not be running so fast."

"But if we do so, we may lose sight of the enemy," said Julian. "It is important we should follow up those fellows to their secret lair."

Williams hesitated before he answered.

"I don't see the necessity for that. They can't do anybody any more harm now. Their hiding-place is no longer a secret."

"But they ought to be given up to punish-

ment," cried Julian, warmly. "They've fired at us in mere wantonness; they are wreckers and murderers. They ought to be punished. You can do as you please, Williams. I'm going after those men to track them down."

"If you'll take a friend's advice," said Williams, "you'll follow the old adage and build a bridge of gold for a flying enemy."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that our men are desperate, and that if you follow them it will be the worse for you if they catch you; while, if you let them go we shall hear no more of them. The old idea has vanished; the bubble has burst. Give them a little time, Grey."

Julian went down to the canoe and began to shove it out of the bushes.

"You can stay," he said, "I'm going. I can't afford to lose sight of those people. I have my reasons and they are not altogether hostile neither. There is a lady among them in whom I take a deep interest if you must know the truth, the daughter of this Peyton. I must see her and try what I can to rescue her from the life before her."

Williams caught him by the arm.

"Do you really mean that, Grey? Is it a case of true love?"

"Yes, I tell you."

"Then that alters the case. I am with you to the last in that."

And the good-hearted doctor helped to push out the canoe, took his place in it, and urged it down the stream at a rapid pace.

The current carried them on in the early light of the morning, till the channel became much broader, and they came once more in sight of the white sails of the schooner, in what appeared to be an arm of the open sea below them, where the white-caps were tumbling in lively style.

To their surprise, the schooner was turning about to come back, and stemming the current very slowly, in front of a long wooded spit of sand, while beyond her, several miles off, were visible the sails of another schooner, with a curling column of smoke that looked very much like a steamer beside it.

Williams's face clouded over as he muttered:

"I thought it could not last forever. They have found the opening."

They pulled the canoe in to the island; hid it in the bushes, and watched attentively. The schooner kept tacking to and fro across the reach below them, as if hesitating and trying to beat back, but unable on account of the strength of the current.

All of a sudden, she came up to the wind with her sails shivering, in the very middle of the channel, and every sail vanished and went down on deck, leaving the naked masts standing.

And then to the still greater amazement of both, they saw the schooner begin to come up against the stream as if by magic, not a sail standing, but the water foaming under her bow, while she advanced straight against the current toward them.

For a moment they were too much surprised to make any remarks and then Williams said:

"Well, I've heard of Flying Dutchmen and Magic Ships and all the rest of them, but I never expected to see one in broad daylight."

"I wish we had a glass," observed Julian. "I'd like to find out how they do that. That's another of their secrets I must find out."

"Ay, ay," said Williams, with a slight sigh. "We'll find them all out by and by. The poor fellows will be hunted out of every hole and corner."

The doctor could not help sympathizing with his former comrades.

They remained hidden in the bushes and kept a close watch on the distant sail and the smoke of the steamer.

The sail was tacking to and fro, but constantly receding, while the steamer was slowly coming up the stream, behind some islands.

The nearest schooner, under bare poles, was breasting the current at the rate of three or four miles an hour, and coming up fast.

Presently she was near enough for them to see the manner of her propulsion, when they were at once amazed and pleased by its simplicity and beauty.

A long cable seemed to have been laid down in the channel and this had been picked up and carried across the schooner's decks from bow to stern close to the masts, while the crew, which packed the deck, was divided into three

or four gangs, who seized the rope and walked aft with it at a pace that increased every moment as the vessel acquired more momentum; till, when it passed Julian, the men were on a slow run, relieving each other before the schooner could lose an inch of way, each man as he came to the stern running back to the bow, in an endless stream on each side the cable, which ran over big blocks at bow and stern.

"Well," said Williams, with some pride, "we poor crackers have a right smart chance of invention after all, Grey. If a Yankee had done that, you'd call it ingenious."

Grey smiled rather grudgingly, for he had all a Northerner's sectional prejudice, and did not like to concede that a Southerner could do anything good in an intellectual way.

Presently the schooner ran past him up the channel, and he heard the men cheering their labor with the strains of "My Maryland," as they trotted to and fro on the schooner's deck.

Then she vanished round a bend, and he said to Williams:

"What can be the meaning of all this?"

"We'll see presently," was the reply. "Watch for the steamer, and we'll find out."

But though they watched long and closely, nearly two hours passed before the steamer hove in sight three miles below, a small tug, stemming the current so slowly that she seemed to crawl rather than move.

On she came, inch by inch, till she had arrived within a mile of the island where they stood, when they saw a column of white spray dash up in front of her bow, and almost immediately she turned tail and went down the stream at ten miles an hour, blowing her whistle in long blasts.

"What was that?" asked Julian.

"A torpedo," said the doctor gravely. "I told you it's a good plan to build a bridge for a flying enemy. Those men are dangerous."

They watched the tug going down the stream at full speed, and Julian said anxiously:

"I wonder if she's injured much?"

"I fancy not. The torpedo must have been a small, weak one, and perhaps it exploded too soon. It has frightened them, but that is all, I think."

They watched the tug go off till it vanished behind the next island, and very soon after saw the white sails of the schooner going off in company with the smoke of the steamer, at a pace that showed the tide favored them both in their flight.

Within an hour more they had both vanished, going to the southwest, and Julian began to feel uneasy at the non-appearance of the yacht.

"Suppose we go up-stream and hunt for her," he said to Williams.

"We cannot stem the stream," was the answer. "There's only one way we can find her—over the flooded Everglade."

"Then let us go that way," said Julian. "Something tells me my father is in danger and needs our help. Suppose the yacht runs into shoal water and sticks fast?"

"She'll be in a bad box," replied Williams in a grave tone. "I think you're right, Grey."

They launched the canoe on the other side of the island, where the water on the flooded Everglade was quite still, and paddled off to the northwest, keeping hidden among the islands scattered here and there, and finding the water so shallow that they frequently struck the bottom with their paddles as they went.

"This place will all be dry in a few days more," said Williams as they went along. "That is the great safety of a hiding among these Everglades. One never knows what's water and what land for a week ahead."

"But that was surely open sea that we saw this morning, when the tug came up?"

"Not a bit of it. We are forty or fifty miles inland, and on the map you'll see it marked as land or Everglades. The fact is, no one knows much about this corner of Florida. It's a good many thousand years younger than the rest of the States."

"But how did the tug get up here then?"

"I don't know. I wouldn't wonder but she was with that schooner, prospecting for lumber stations, and ran on us by surprise. She'll take away a terrible tale with her."

"I wonder if they'll believe it or treat it as they did Stevens's story?"

"Stevens' story? What story?"

The doctor listened while Julian gave him a short account of Stevens's experience, when he answered:

"Stevens is a crank, I'm afraid, and his story is exaggerated."

"But I was in the light-house myself when we were attacked," said Julian warmly. "I can testify of my own knowledge that we were attacked, while you know whether or not I was shot by these men."

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"As to the shooting there is no doubt, but I'm not so sure whether you did not bring it on yourself, Mr. Grey."

"Bring it on myself? How?"

"By prying into their affairs. These people were doing you no harm. They only asked to be let alone."

"But they didn't leave other people alone. I saw them robbing wrecks myself."

"Are you sure the wreckers belonged to this party up at the lake?"

"Of course I am."

"How do you know?"

Julian hesitated and had to acknowledge to himself that it was only hearsay and suspicion on which he based his judgment. Williams noted his hesitation, and said to him in an earnest tone:

"Grey, you're a stranger here, while I was born and raised in Florida. When I was a boy, the Indians owned all this Everglade, and a bad lot they were. It took the United States Government eight years to get rid of them, and even then a number of men remained behind, belonging to the Seminoles, and no one has seen much of them since that time. I've heard of these Florida Wreckers, and I've heard of Alligator Ike, as they call him at Jacksonville. He has been well known as a trader for ten years past, and has controlled all the alligator hides that have been sent to market."

"But you did not know he was a rebel general, keeping up a shadow of resistance to the best Government the world ever saw," said Julian warmly.

The doctor smiled.

"No, I didn't, but we all down here look at things a little different from what you do. We own we were whipped, but you can't expect us to fall down and worship the people that whipped us, because they didn't hang us all. Besides, there is something hidden behind all this settlement by the volcano which I don't understand and I fancy the key to part of the mystery lies in the hands of your father and mother."

"Mine?" echoed Julian, amazed.

"Yes. Has it never seemed strange to you that your father allowed young Peyton to go from him into the interior in full uniform and never detained him as a prisoner when he was entirely in his power?"

"Why, I attributed that to his generosity."

"You were right; but what reason had he to be generous to the son of General Peyton, or Alligator Ike, whichever you please to call him?"

Julian was compelled to acknowledge that he did not know, and Williams continued:

"It's all coming to an end now, and we'll find out pretty soon. I wish we could see the yacht, Grey. I don't like her silence."

They paddled on among the islands and halted at sunset in the midst of an overflowed prairie, where the game was so plentiful and tame that they saw it had not been much, if at all hunted.

They shot a heron and lighted a fire in the shelter of a wood as night came on, when they cooked supper and went to sleep, tired out with a hard day's paddling.

Julian slept uneasily and dreamed that he had met Clara Peyton, and that she was reproaching him for disturbing her people in their retreat, till finally she said to him:

"You think your people are all right and that we are a parcel of wretches, but I tell you that we will never, never, while there is a man or a girl left here, utter the word we scorn, 'surrender.'"

Then it seemed to him as if some one had seized him from behind and he struggled hard, with a feeling as if all the strength had gone out of him.

The clutch awakened him, and he saw that it was day, while Alligator Ike stood over him with a pistol in his hand, saying:

"Surrender or die!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE FLAG OF TRUCE.

For a moment Julian felt his muscles contracting for a spring with the instinct of resistance, and then he saw that he was surrounded by men in gray, well armed, that Dr. Williams lay on the ground by him with a pistol pointing at his head in the hands of Ned Peyton; so he made a virtue of necessity by saying:

"I surrender of course. You can murder us if you like, but you'll be sorry for it."

Alligator Ike made him no direct answer, but he turned to a man beside him saying:

"Sergeant Dummit, take the arms of the prisoners, and keep them under guard till we get to the station."

Then forward came the very "cracker" who had surrendered to Julian a month before and possessed himself of the young gentleman's dandified weapons with a grin on his usually rather stupid face, observing:

"Come, Yank, reckon I've got the drop on you this time. Hey! What d'ye say?"

Then Julian was permitted to rise, and saw that he was surrounded by a party of about thirty men in all sorts of nondescript garbs of gray and brown; but all wearing cross-belts and carrying rifles.

Three long skiffs or bateaux, with pointed bows, square sterns and flat bottoms, lay in the water by the island, and explained how the sleepers had been stolen upon, while it seemed to Julian as he looked at the flooded Everglade, that the water had risen considerably during the night, while the sky was covered with dark clouds with ill-defined misty edges and a fine rain was beginning to fall in the early dawn.

He and the doctor were transferred to one of the long bateaux, and the men in gray and brown filled all three and began to pole off across the marsh to the north.

Alligator Ike or General Peyton still wore his full Confederate uniform, and sat in the stern of the bateau by the prisoners, with a grave and impenetrable face.

Ned Peyton was in another boat, and had not held any communication with either of the prisoners, seeming to Julian as if he was bent on keeping his eyes averted from them. When Julian tried to speak to his captor, Alligator Ike said, in a stern tone:

"You all are not asked to talk. We all can do that ourselves."

At this strong hint Julian relapsed into silence, and the three boats pushed on in a rain that was increasing momentarily, till it became a perfect deluge, in the midst of which they poled their way along with no shelter, till every one was wet to the skin, and no sign appeared of a cessation of the rain.

There was no wind, but the clouds seemed as if they were trying to turn themselves inside out, while heavy peals of thunder and vivid flashes of lightning showed the character of the disturbance to be electric.

The curtain of rain and the veil of clouds overhead produced a darkness that very much resembled the coming of night, and blotted out all the features of the landscape as they poled their way along.

Dr. Williams nudged Julian, and muttered:

"Bad weather for fever, if there's no whisky to be had. Warm rain is the worst thing in the world for fever."

"Silence in the boat," sternly interrupted the voice of Alligator Ike, and then they poled on again in silence.

It seemed to Julian as if they went on in this way for half a day, but really it could not have been over a couple of hours, when he heard the voice of Ned Peyton from the leading boat:

"Hallo! in the rear, general."

"Well?" responded Alligator Ike, briefly.

"The lake's ahead, sir, and I can see the Yankee steam-launch dodging about."

"Run in to Shelter Island, then," said Ike, quietly. "We've got wherewithal to deal now, Captain Peyton."

The bateaux pursued their way in the rain to an island covered with a dense thicket of orange-trees, under whose branches, that drooped over the water, all three ran silently and tied up to an overhanging bank, hollowed by the currents.

Then Alligator Ike said to Julian:

"Git up and git ashore."

He seemed to take a pleasure in emphasizing his "cracker" dialect, though Julian knew that he could drop it on occasion.

The young man could do nothing but obey

orders, so he stepped on shore and was taken through the dripping woods to a small clearing in the center of the island where was erected a low log cabin, thatched with palmetto.

Alligator Ike went to this hut, opened a door, and said briefly:

"Git in thar!"

They obeyed, and had the pleasure of seeing a sentry put on the door, in the person of a tall, grim-looking cracker, who carried a long, old-fashioned, muzzle-loading rifle in his huge paws, and to whom the general said:

"If either of them tries to get out, put a hole through one and jab the bayonet into the other. Do you understand?"

The cracker saluted just like an old soldier.

"All right, gineral," he answered.

Then the general turned to Doctor Williams: "I didn't expect to see you down hyar," he said sternly, "consorting with the Yanks to drive us out of the last refuge we had."

"Don't be unjust," retorted Williams with much spirit. "You might know, from seeing me here, that no one wanted to hurt you. I had no evil intentions, neither had Mr. Grey here; but when we were shot at, you couldn't expect but that I, for one, would fire back."

Alligator Ike seemed pleased at the reply.

"Ay, ay," he said, "the old stock will fight, won't it Williams?"

"Yes, and the young one too," retorted Williams, laying his hand on Julian's shoulder. "If it had not been for this young gentleman here, we should not have made half so good a fight; and as it is you had to catch us asleep, or you could never have taken us. What are you going to do with us now, Peyton?"

Peyton smiled in rather a dubious manner.

"We shall see, after a while," he said, and then he walked out of the cabin into the rain, leaving the two friends alone in the hut.

For some time they were silent, and then when it began to clear up outside, as it did soon, Williams began to feel about in his pockets and produced his pipe and tobacco.

"No use being wretched while the great consoler, nicotine, is here," he said, philosophically.

"Now, if we only had a light, we might be as happy as ever, but, alas, for the luck, all my matches are wet I fear."

Julian fumbled in his pockets and produced a water-proof match-safe, which still contained three matches, so that the two friends were enabled to light their pipes and smoke away their bad humor, which they did for some minutes, when the sentry looked in at the door and remarked with an affable smile:

"I'm powerful fond of a smoke myself, but I hain't got sich a thing as a spunk of fire anywhar. Pity, too."

"You can have some of ours," replied Williams instantly, with a side look at Julian. "This gentleman's quite a rich man, Mr.—ah, what's your name?"

"My name's McCoy," returned the "cracker" in a still more affable tone, edging into the cabin a little. "Scat! Haow it rained! Pears like I'd never seen sich a rain since I cum to Floridy. Got any 'baccor, gents?"

He had drawn out an old black brierwood pipe and was looking round with that vague and speculative air that pervades the old toppers in a country bar-room, when a stranger walks up to the bar and looks over one shoulder, to see how many there are in the room.

Julian could not resist a smile at the cool assurance displayed, but Williams pressed his arm warningly as he observed:

"Ah, by the by, Grey, you had some cigars in your case, didn't you? Give the gentleman one. It's better than a pipe."

Julian took the hint and produced his last cigar, which he handed to the sentry, who received it with much affability and stuck it into his cheek with gusto.

Then the doctor rose and began to puff at his pipe to raise it to a glow, but with such little apparent success that he ejaculated:

"Confound it! the pipe's going out, the tobacco's so wet. Here, Grey, come here and give us a little fire, like a good fellow."

Julian did as he was requested, beginning to see the drift of the plot; so that, a moment later, the three men had their faces together, while the sentry had set his musket against a wall, and was eagerly puffing away at the half-empty bowl of the doctor's pipe to get a light.

In that moment Julian Grey dealt him a sudden blow under the ear that felled him to the floor like a slaughtered ox, while Williams

sprung to the musket, pointed it at him, and cried, as he cocked the piece:

"Surrender, or you're a dead man!"

The discomfited cracker held up his hand.

"Don't shoot, Yank," he said. "You got me fair that time; I cave."

Then Julian took off his belts, without any resistance being offered, and tied their late guardian hand and foot, a process he endured with perfect equanimity, when they allowed him to finish his cigar in peace.

"I don't b'ar no malice, Yanks," he said to them. "We don't all hate ye so bad as the gin'ral; but we can't go back on the old man, ye know. We was sworn in, and we've got to stay till he lets us out."

"And you mean to say that's the reason you stick together?" asked Williams. "Don't you know the war's over long ago?"

"Sartin we do, sir; but we all hain't done got our paroles, and the gin'ral he 'lows as how we're liable to be hung if the Yanks ketch us now, so we fights as well as we knows how, that's all."

"Now look at me," said Williams authoritatively.

"I'm no Yank. I was surgeon of the Twenty-seventh Florida."

The sentry grinned.

"Reckon it don't take much to know you ain't no Yank, doctor."

"Then you believe what I say?"

"I b'lieve you means to tell the truth like any Southern gentleman," returned McCoy, politely. "But we all has tuk an oath, Doc, and we can't break it."

"And what's the oath, McCoy?"

"To stick by the old man till he tells us to go whar we like," replied McCoy, soberly.

Williams beckoned Julian out of the hut, and said to him softly:

"That's a specimen of the old Southern soldier; stupid as a mule, obstinate as ten of them, but he'll never break his word. Now we've got to get out of this."

"How?" asked Julian, looking round him with some dismay. "How shall we get out of this without a boat?"

"I'll show you," said the doctor, and with that he led the way through the wood to the side opposite that at which they had entered, and showed Julian that they were at the edge of the lake, where still smoked the volcano.

Out in the lake, puffing to and fro, they saw the little Water Lily, looking as if she were trying to escape from the pursuit of the three slowly-moving bateaux that were maneuvering in such a way as to try and hem her into a corner of the lake between two islands, in a place where the tops of grass showed that the water was very shallow.

The doctor advanced to the edge of the island, waded into the water up to his armpits, and fired McCoy's rifle in the air, the bullet singing away toward the bateaux, and skipping over the water between them.

As he had anticipated, all these boats turned toward him, and the Water Lily made a dash into the open lake, at top speed, after the fugitives who were signaling.

As she passed near the bateaux they opened a rattling fire, to which no response was returned and she outstripped them and came racing up to the island, where Julian and the doctor were taken on board, and Colonel Grey ejaculated:

"Thank God, boys, I thought you were gone for good. What an anxious night—no, two nights—we've passed."

"How did you get back here?" asked Julian, as they steamed back into the middle of the lake, in defiance of the clumsy bateaux.

"We followed the edge of the channel till we found a thin place, where we charged the bank and got through. We were going down after you when we heard the sound of distant rifle-shots, and concluded to go no further that night for fear of accidents. We cast anchor in the middle of the stream and lay till morning, when we were about dropping down to look for you. Just then Jupe told us that he saw the Stonewall coming, and sure enough we saw a schooner under bare poles coming up to us, a vessel of such a size that we saw plainly it would never do to let it come near us."

"I got up all steam and headed up the current, finding it such slow work that I wondered how in the world a sailing-vessel could ever stem it as the Stonewall appeared to be doing."

"I found out at last, through the glass, that

they were hauling up a cable, which I knew must be laid along the channel of the river. I flatter myself I showed them a trick worth two of theirs."

"Why, what did you do?" asked Williams.

"Fished for the cable as I went, and took it on my own decks, of course, steaming as hard as I could besides."

"And how did it work?" asked the doctor, with a shade of annoyance.

"So well that I left their schooner behind me at every pull, and ran to the head of the cable."

"And where is that?"

"About five miles below the lake, where the current begins to grow rapid, I ran up to a huge anchor, so large that our five or six hands could not weigh it. I was three miles ahead of the schooner then, and so I left the rope and ran into this lake again."

"And where's the schooner?" asked Julian in an anxious tone.

"Gone down again, I think. She did not come above the anchor, at all events."

"When did you see those bateaux?"

"Last night they came in, and one of them guarded the mouth of the channel and fired at us whenever we went near it. The others chased us round, and kept us moving all night."

"Here they come again," observed Dr. Williams at this juncture. "Now Colonel Grey, I put it to you, sir, ought this thing to go on any longer?"

Grey looked surprised.

"How can I stop it if they fire at us?"

"I've reason to think, sir, that you have some hold on General Peyton or he on you, which makes you hate each other—"

"My God, no," exclaimed Grey, interrupting. "It's the very reverse, doctor. I wouldn't hurt a hair of his head for a great deal. I would give anything to make peace with him." The doctor seemed puzzled.

"I know he thinks you wronged him. I've heard him say so long, long ago, since the war."

"I can explain that if he would only let me," Grey said, earnestly; "but he will not. He is imbibed, morbid, mad. He will hear not a word from me."

"He'll hear it from me," said the doctor, firmly. "I'm going to meet him with a flag of truce and try and stop this useless bloodshed."

"My dear sir," exclaimed Grey, "if you can only do it I shall regard it as the greatest favor ever done me. But they may shoot at you."

"They'll do no such thing," answered Williams, proudly. "You all up North don't know we all of the South yet. I'll show you. No true Southern soldier ever fired on a flag of truce."

"Take the canoe then, and God speed you," the colonel said, earnestly.

The small canoe which Julian had made at Jupiter Light-house was hoisted out; the doctor got into it with a white flag and paddled off to the middle of the lake, where the three long bateaux were now coming forward in a line, with their men rowing and a party in the bow of each, musket in hand, as if to make a regular attack on the Water Lily.

They saw the boats stop at sight of the canoe, saw the white flag waved, and then the canoe joined the bateaux, and remained in the middle of the lake for near half an hour.

Through the glass one could see that an earnest conversation was going on between the doctor and Alligator Ike, and then the canoe returned alone to the Water Lily.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE CONFERENCE.

WHEN Doctor Williams came on board, his face was grave and perturbed, and he said to Gray rather reluctantly:

"I'm afraid there will be some trouble. Come into the cabin and I'll tell you."

They went in and sat down—Colonel Grey, his son and Williams—when the doctor said:

"He will only consent to a conference on the condition that you come alone and unarmed to meet him in the midst of his men. If you do so, he pledges his honor to allow you to speak freely and permit you to depart to your yacht unharmed; but he adds that, should you fail to convince him that you had a right to come here, he will take his, as the representative of the State of Florida, and kill you and all your party as spies."

"As spies?" echoed Grey, amazed

"Yes, or guerrillas, more properly."

"But what is he?" asked the colonel indignantly, interrupting him.

Williams smiled.

"He claims to hold an unexpired commission signed by the President of the Confederacy to command the last remnant of the Confederate army, which has never surrendered, while you have been discharged and are no longer in the service. Moreover, he claims to hold a Mexican commission from the Emperor Maximilian."

"But he's dead long ago. This is the wildest sort of nonsense," broke in Julian. "Is the man crazy, doctor?"

"I'm not diagnosing his case," said Williams, in the driest manner. "I'm telling you what he says and has the power to enforce. You must remember that you can only escape by one way, and that is closed by a guard boat. You cannot return the way you came over the Locohatchee, for that is only practicable after a storm. In the mean time your steam will give out, and you'll be at Peyton's mercy. You have only one chance, to convince him he has wronged you, not you him, and that your intentions are good toward him. The man is getting tired of this lonely life, warring against the world, and he is amenable to reason. Moreover, he has two children who have never seen anything of the world, and whose influence is on your side. The question is, will you trust him, or will you run the gantlet of the channel with the chance of being sunk by a torpedo and go to sea to bring Uncle Sam's forces up here to rout out what you call a nest of traitors?"

When the doctor had finished there was a short silence, and the colonel said:

"Julian, what do you say?"

Julian, whose young blood was boiling, cried: "I say force the passage, attack these insolent fools. We have eight men here, and plenty of good repeating rifles. We can run close to them, and exterminate them."

The colonel pursed up his lips.

"Do you know that their bullets go through our sides like paper, Julian? We are more than likely to be exterminated ourselves."

"Then get up a barricade of mattresses," said the impetuous young man, warmly. "Didn't you ever fight such odds in the war, father?"

"Not without ruing it, Julian. No; that is not quite practicable except as a last resort. I am inclined to think that the doctor's offer is the one to be accepted. After all, the Peyton I knew was a generous-hearted fellow, and he cannot be so much changed as to have lost all his old feelings toward me."

Williams looked relieved.

"I think you're right," he answered. "I'll answer for it that he will show no treachery to you, and the rest depends on yourself. Shall I make the signal?"

"Stop," said the colonel, "you said something about putting myself in Peyton's power. Do you mean I'm to invite him to advance to the yacht?"

"No. You are to go and meet him in a canoe, with Julian and myself."

"I'll agree to that. And after the conference?"

"You are to be free to return to the yacht. Your embarkation will be the signal for hostilities to recommence."

"Be it so," said Grey, gravely. "I accept the terms. Make your signal."

Williams went to the bow of the yacht, fired a pistol in the air, and waved the flag three times to and fro. He was answered by a similar flag from one of the boats, when all three shipped their oars and lay idle on the water.

"Captain Jim," said the colonel to his engineer-chief, "keep your steam up, so as to be ready to start at a moment's notice. Get out all the mattresses and lumber you can, to make a barricade round the boat. We may have to fight yet."

Then he went over the side into the white canoe, and Julian and the doctor followed in another one that they had brought with them from the North, when all three paddled slowly toward the bateaux of Peyton.

As they came closer, they heard the general give the orders "Oars! Down! Give way!" when all three bateaux moved off in a procession to the very island where Julian had first seen Clara Peyton and her brother, and where now the old battle-flag was flying, with

its crimson field and St. Andrew's cross, sown with stars.

The canoes followed, headed by Colonel Grey with his white flag, and the general's boat grounded on the beach by the flag-staff in front of the house, when Peyton sprung on shore followed by his men, and gave the order to "fall in" as they landed.

When Grey's party at last reached the beach, they found a silent line of disciplined soldiers, as any one could see despite their rough dress, and Peyton lifted his hat with stiff ceremony to Grey, observing:

"As commandant of Post Lost Cause, sir, I welcome you under the folds of the flag I love and honor. Guard, present arms!"

Then the brown-clad men presented arms with the stiff precision of veterans, and Grey touched his hat in return for the salute, as he answered:

"As officer of the Volunteer Army of the Union, sir, entitled by act of Congress to wear its uniform on all occasions of ceremony, I thank you for your courtesy, though the flag that I see yonder is now recognized by no nation on earth."

Peyton smiled—a slight, haughty curl of the lip, as he answered:

"We may compel its recognition yet, sir, as we did once before. But that has nothing to do with our present purpose. I am informed that you wish to see me, to try and justify your conduct and treat for a surrender, at discretion, of your Yankee forces in the lake."

"I came to do no such thing," retorted the colonel, rather warmly. "I came to see my old friend, Isaac Beverly Peyton, to speak of private matters, and to see if I cannot rouse in him some of the spirit of old, which led him to place in my care a trust—"

"That you betrayed," interrupted Peyton in a fierce tone, frowning and tugging at his black beard, with flaming eyes. "Speak not of that. I had forgiven it. I know you Yankees have no souls. 'Tis not your fault ye were born so, I suppose. But don't refer to it, man. My temper is none of the best."

His eyes rolled and flashed, and he seemed to have a hard struggle with himself to keep his passion within the bounds of decency before his men.

Julian, who understood nothing of this, looked at his father wonderingly.

The colonel was very pale and his face was full of some deep emotion as he came up to Peyton and said in a low tone:

"Peyton, for God's sake, for the sake of the dead and living alike, let us talk this matter over quietly, without so many witnesses. I must speak about it. I came here to do it. I cannot keep silence if I would."

Peyton stared at him in silence and some apparent wonder for a moment, and then said, with a stiff inclination:

"Certainly, Colonel Grey; but I warn you that my determination cannot be altered. Be pleased to enter my house, and remember that it is mine by the right of my sword, and by no sort of permission from your Yankee Government."

Grey compressed his lips and shrugged his shoulders as he passed on after the haughty Confederate, followed in turn, at a signal, by Julian and the doctor.

General Peyton ascended the broad steps of the veranda which ran round the house and called to his son:

"Captain Peyton, you can dismiss the guard till I call them together again. Let them stay near the house while you come in."

His son saluted in stiff military fashion, and the general led the way into a large room, where he pointed to chairs and said:

"Be seated, gentlemen."

The sun had come out of the clouds since the rain ceased, and now shone into the room, showing, what Julian had not expected to see, a profusion of articles of foreign make, besides the furniture, which appeared to have all come out of ships' cabins.

"Yes," pursued the general, with a scornful curl of his lip; "you have had your revenue cutters around our coast, trying to find this lake. You have had expeditions after expeditions, guided by the smoke that nature furnishes for a guide, but you are the first people that have ever penetrated here alive. And now Colonel Grey, tell your story, sir."

Thus urged Grey began:

"General Peyton, you said, a little while ago, that you could not bear any reference to past transactions between us two."

"Better drop them," interrupted Peyton; "for your own sake, Grey. You have not much to be proud of there."

"Nor anything to be ashamed of," said Grey in an earnest tone. "It is necessary to speak of the past. I came to Florida for that very thing."

Peyton's lip curled.

"You did! After you had ruined me! Who was it, I ask you, Mark Grey, before the war, found you, a poor boy, without a penny to bless himself with, advanced you money and lent you his name for credit, till you rose to competence? Who did this, I say?"

"You did," replied Grey calmly. "I have never yet sought to deny it."

"And who was it," pursued Peyton, "who saved your life twice in the war, and saved you from the prison pen at another time?"

"It was you," again replied Grey. "You did far more for me than I had any right to expect, and when misfortune came on the South, and all men saw the end was coming, you did me an honor that made me proud, indeed; you trusted me with all the money you had made in blockade-running during the war."

"And you stole every cent and denied having received it," interrupted Peyton fiercely. "You drove my children to beggary, me to this hole in the swamp, made an outlaw of me to preserve my independence, while you, during all the years that have elapsed since the war, have been living on my money and growing rich and fat with good cheer. Dare you deny it, hypocrite Yankee, with your grave face and canting airs? By heavens, I only wonder what it is keeps me from killing you now where you stand."

"I can tell you, Ike Peyton," said Grey, calmly. "I can tell you what keeps you from killing me."

"Well, what?" asked Peyton, breathing hard.

"Your honor as a soldier and a man. Besides that, you have made a grave mistake. The money you intrusted to me was not stolen, but invested by me for your benefit in bonds of Western cities, where high interest was paid, which interest has been reinvested, so that the money now remaining to your credit on my books, amounts to five times the sum you placed in my hands. I ask your word only for what that sum was."

Peyton had been watching him like a cat at a mouse-hole, with his eyes gleaming, and now he said eagerly and doubtfully:

"You acknowledge that you owe me this money before witnesses?"

"I acknowledge it, and I leave it to you to say what the sum was."

"It was seventy thousand dollars in gold, proceeds of three cargoes of cotton in which I had an interest," said Peyton rapidly. "The money was buried, and I intrusted you with the secret, the only man that knew it besides myself. When I went to look for it after the surrender it had been stolen, and you were in command of the district in which it was hidden. I went to you in the midst of your staff and taxed you with the theft. You pretended not to know me or anything about it, and I cursed and defied you there and made my escape, despite all your orderlies and bullies. Is that true, Mark Grey?"

"Partly true," was the reply.

"How partly true?" asked Peyton, angrily.

"Did you not deny possession of it?"

"I did, and for a good reason. In those days that property was liable to confiscation, if I owned having it in my possession. My staff officers were all around me, and any one of them would have reported me at once had I acknowledged it to be your money. You would have lost it, and the Government would have claimed it. Had you come to me alone, I could have given it to you then; but your temper drove you to rushing into my head-quarters like a maniac, and I had to deny everything to save you and your children. That money now awaits your order, Isaac Beverly Peyton, swelled to the sum of three hundred and fifty thousand dollars in cash, but on one condition."

Peyton had listened in mute amazement, and now he asked, hesitatingly:

"And what is the condition?"

"That you cease this miserable masquerade of fidelity to the Lost Cause," said Grey, with a caustic smile, "let these poor fellows go to their own affairs, instead of binding them with nonsensical oaths, and that you let your two children come out and see the real world as it is, instead of burying them here in this morbid

seclusion, where they and you are no good to any one in the world, even yourselves. There, I've spoken my mind at last, Peyton, and you can do as you please. You can shoot me and Julian here, make your cousin Mary a widow; kill your old friend Doctor Williams, and hug your idea to your breast; but when it's all over, you may say to yourself, three hundred and fifty thousand dollars can't be got every day. I may as well haul down the flag that has become a relic of the past and wake up to the fact that the world moves. There, Ike, do what you like about it. I'm through."

And the colonel quietly picked up a cigar from a heap on the table, lighting it in the most matter-of-fact manner possible, and observing:

"Confounded poor tobacco you grow down here."

Then he threw himself into a large arm-chair and looked out of the window, while the face of the outlawed general was a study of various expressions for nearly a minute, at the end of which time he said, huskily:

"Grey, are you in earnest in all this?"

Grey looked up with a smile as he replied:

"I can't pay it back to you here, in gold, for I don't carry such sums about me; but if you will designate a place where you wish it paid, you shall have the money as soon as I can get to a post-office or telegraph station."

Peyton hesitated, walked up and down the room, looked out of the window, and finally said, in a low tone of voice:

"There's only one place. It must be out of the United States. I have forfeited a right to live there. My retreat is known."

"To none but us, and we will not betray it," answered Grey, quickly. "If that is your only ground for uneasiness, dismiss it. You can sail out of here and return to the United States as free as air. No one wants to hurt you."

Peyton shook his head.

"There's that cursed inquisitive light-house man, who could not be silenced. I was a fool not to kill him when I had the chance."

"He shall not say a word. He is on board the Water Lily now, and you can secure his silence by means that never fail in my State. Pay him to keep his mouth shut."

"By Heavens!" muttered the giant, passing his hand over his brow, the clouds clearing away like magic as he looked at Grey; "it seems to be a dream, after all. Shall I do it?"

"Of course you'll do it," said Julian Grey, coming to his father's help, "for if you don't you will make your children very unhappy."

CHAPTER XXXI.

CONCLUSION.

THE general turned on him with the old stare of Alligator Ike, that used to petrify him so thoroughly when he was fresh in Florida.

"What are you talking about, young man?" he said sternly. "What do you know of my children?"

"I know one of them pretty well," returned young Grey dryly. "He put a bullet through my shoulder without any provocation; but we've made that up, long ago; at least I have. How is it, Captain Ned?"

Ned Peyton colored, glanced at his father, hesitated, and said in a low tone:

"I had to do my duty and obey the general's orders, Mr. Grey. A soldier has no animosity against an honorable enemy. I am sorry I wounded you, but I had to do it."

The elder Peyton started as his son spoke, and glanced quickly at Colonel Grey. The falsity of his teachings had never struck him so forcibly as when they were unconsciously illustrated by a son, who worshiped him and believed every word he said.

"I'm sorry Ned shot you," he said hastily to Julian, "but you see it was necessary for us to preserve our incognito strictly."

"But there's no further need of it now, is there?" interrupted Colonel Grey. "You can live where you please and so can these people."

"I think," said Peyton reluctantly, "that you are right. I may have to haul down—"

His voice failed him as he looked out of the window, up at the folds of the flag that he had learned to love so well, and Ned, with the quick sympathy of youth, came to his side and whispered to him:

"Never mind the rest of us, father. We're willing to die with you, if need be."

"No, no," answered his father huskily, "it won't do, boy. It won't do. I've kept it all these years, but it must go at last. Boy, the flag must

come down. It has waved for nigh twenty years over the ashes of the Lost Cause. It's time we packed it away forever with the rest."

He ended with something very like a sob, but recovered himself instantly, drew up to his full height, and said to Grey:

"Colonel Grey, for nearly twenty years I have done you a wrong, and a still greater one to the men under my charge. You have displayed a—a generosity that I never believed inherent in a Yankee; but you shall see that when we all down here surrender, we surrender for good. Sir, I surrender to you. Take my sword."

He unbuckled the belt and handed the weapon to Grey, who waved it away with his hand saying:

"General, it is not necessary. I hold no command now. I am a simple citizen of the American republic; you are another. All you have to do is to resume your station as a citizen, and hoist the flag under which we both were born."

Peyton listened gravely, and bowed when the other had finished. Then he turned to his son, and said:

"Parade the guard, sir."

Ned bowed and went out, to return in a few minutes and say:

"General, the guard is paraded."

Peyton went outside, followed by the Greys and Doctor Williams.

The whole population of the little settlement was gathered behind the armed men, and a crowd of gaping negroes was gathered in the rear of the soldiers.

The general advanced to the front, and said to the men:

"Boys, I have a few words to say to you. Sergeant Dummit, advance and take hold of the halcyons."

Dummit, with a grave, serious face, did as he was bid.

Then Peyton drew a long breath.

"Men," he said slowly, "for eighteen years you have clung to the Lost Cause through weal and woe. Alone out here in the swamps of Florida, deserted by mankind, we have kept our fealty to the oath we swore to each other. Now the time has come to haul down the flag we have loved so well and to bury the memory of the past forever. The war is over. The Confederate States have ceased to exist. The negroes are free. You are all released from your obligations. Sergeant haul down the flag."

The bronzed veterans burst into sobs as the flag came down, and the negroes stared stupidly at each other till Peyton said to the men:

"Men, you are no longer soldiers. Break ranks; march."

Then they threw down their weapons and crowded round him silently as he shook hands with one after the other, till one of them asked him:

"And what'll we all do now, general?"

"Whatever you like," said Grey, coming out before them. "Every man is free to stay here and live as he has done, save that there is no more war. No one wants to disturb you. Do you wish to remain?"

"Sartin we do," replied Dummit aloud.

"We all has been as happy as clams at high water for years. We don't want to leave Lost Cause. All we want is to be let alone."

"Then I'll answer for it, no one shall disturb you," answered Grey. "The property here is yours, I believe."

"Every stick of it," said Peyton. "We came here with nothing, and we have made everything. Boys, I give it all to you. For myself, this is no place for me and mine now."

Three weeks later a party was gathered on the quarter-deck of a large and beautifully-modeled schooner, which was plowing the Atlantic on the way toward the distant coast of France, with the French flag at her peak.

A tall and very powerful-looking man with a magnificent black beard sat in a camp-chair by the taffrail next to Colonel Grey, while Clara Peyton and Julian Grey, Inez Zuniga and Ned Peyton formed very suspicious-looking couples at opposite sides of the mainmast, and conversed together in whispers or low tones, with the confidential manner peculiar to engaged couples. Mrs. Grey and Alice were near the colonel, and Peyton was speaking.

"I promised I would tell you all, Grey," said Peyton, "when we were out of sight of land, and now I'm going to redeem my promise. Ask any questions you like."

"In the first place, then," said the colonel, "how came you to find your secret retreat in the Everglades, and why did you occupy it so long?"

"The question is easily answered. You know my father was in the Florida war, and it was in campaigning there that he found Lake Okeechobee, which he entered from the north. After the war he became quite intimate with some of the Indian chiefs that elected to stay in the Everglades rather than go to the West, and as a boy I was adopted into the Seminole tribe and trusted with the secret of the smoke. I knew that a small volcano existed entirely unsuspected, somewhere to the south of Lake Okeechobee, but the Indians held the place sacred and allowed no one to go there save once a year, when they held some mystic ceremonies there. At one of these visits I was present and was shown the secret path from the lake to the volcano and its lake."

"Time passed on, however, and I forgot all about it in other scenes and cares, till the close of the war, and my misunderstanding with you brought it back to my memory. You know the Indians have dwindled in numbers greatly since the Florida war, and there are barely fifty fighting-men left in the remnant of the tribe in Florida."

"I determined to lead what few men remained to me to this secret place, where I knew we were perfectly safe from molestation, and I own I had visions at that day of restoring the Lost Cause, for Kirby Smith had not then surrendered in Texas."

"When I received the news that he too had fallen, I was too incensed and obstinate to give up my settlement. I had nearly sixty men there, the Indians had fraternized with us, and I began to see a way of making the settlement flourishing and self-supporting. The trade in alligator-hides had just then started; the skins were valuable, and with the assistance of my corps of men, all good hunters and shots, I saw that I could accumulate such a stock that I could control the market, keep up the price of the skins, and lay up a store of money for arms and ammunition wherewith to defend our settlement if the Government should ever discover us. We all had slaves, some that had followed us on the march, others that we had compelled to follow us, and living was a question of no difficulty in such a land of plenty. For three or four years I kept up communication with the St. John's, and did a thriving trade as Alligator Ike, when no one but my old Confederate friends had any suspicion that we had an independent Government defying the United States in the depths of the Everglades."

"And then at last my ambition began to take wider strides, and I resolved to try and open an independent trade with some foreign nation through the coast. I knew there was a channel which the Indians called the Holawangies, or Dangerous, which led to the ocean. It was said to be so rapid that a canoe once sucked into it, could never get back but must be carried out to sea and perish. This channel I determined to explore and found it all that the Indians had said in the summer, when the prairies are dried up and the river goes rushing along between banks some twenty feet high. In the winter I know that it was surrounded by a shallow lake of overflowed flats and it was in the winter I explored it to the mouth and found that it came out between two lonely and uninhabited keys fit for nothing but nesting-places for pelicans."

"Having explored the channel I made up my mind that I could get a vessel up it by laying a cable from the head of the stream down the channel and determined to try it when I found a vessel."

"The next thing was to find a vessel whose owner would run a risk and keep a secret to get rich cargoes for a small sum. I found the man in Captain Conneau, a man who had served on our Alabama, whom I knew well, and whom I hunted up in Havana where he had a schooner that was said to be still engaged in the slave trade."

"Then we engaged in the wrecking business and managed to secure all sorts of cargoes by piecemeal, every time a storm came on. I don't defend our actions then, but remember that we held a state of war to exist, that it was only the enemy's vessels that were ever driven ashore, and that if we had not taken the property it would have been destroyed by the sea,

for the coast is uninhabited and Jupiter Light is the only station for a hundred miles."

"But Julian says you killed the crews of the wrecked vessels," said the colonel gravely. "Do you call that warfare?"

"Julian was mistaken; he saw only from a distance. The men who came ashore alive were saved, carried inland to our settlement and sent off in the schooner whenever she got a cargo. All were seafaring men and Conneau was able from his enormous profits to pay very high wages so that none of them suffered. It is true we handled them roughly, if they resisted, but it was necessary to our safety that they should not escape to carry the news of our retreat to other places."

"It was only from this necessity of self-preservation that I had to treat Stevens of the light-house so roughly. We were all making a fortune and his appearance was a threat of complete ruin to us. It cost me a good many thousand dollars to get things square at Washington but we did it."

"What?" cried Grey. "Do you mean to say that you—"

"I mean that you don't know what can be done with money at Washington since the war. We are a great nation now with a great army of hungry clerks who must be fed, and money will do anything there if a man knows how to use it. Of course I had to do the business through agents, but there are plenty of our people at Washington and I had the advantage of knowing that Stevens had been wounded in the head during the war. The accusation of delusions and insanity covered all. He was known to be a fanatical abolitionist before the war, and on that I played my best hand. The fact is the Government has to shut its eyes to a great deal that goes on in the South and it is quite right. You can't do any better in a Government of the people. But I was sorry for the poor fellow and now I've made it right with him. He will never be disturbed again and ten thousand dollars will make him comfortable for life in Florida."

"But one thing I don't understand," said Grey, thoughtfully.

"And what's that?"

"How you managed to educate your two children so well down there. Ned is quite a well-read young man and Clara—well, you see what Julian thinks of her. How did you do it?"

Peyton looked proud as he answered:

"You all at the North don't think as we all do at the South. You think no one can be educated well unless he goes to school. We don't believe in schools, but we do in education at home. Our people at large are rude. The 'crackers' can seldom read and write; but you'll find among us higher and better education than anywhere else, because it's confined to a few who can afford to learn. I had a good education, as you know, and I taught Ned all I knew, and Clara as much as she could receive. My poor wife, who died only eight years ago, was a treasure, and she did the rest. Is that all you want to ask?"

"Only this more: Why have you insisted on our coming to France with you in Conneau's vessel, instead of going back with us to the North in the Water Lily?"

Peyton hesitated a moment, and then said:

"Frankly, to gain time to subdue myself. As long as I was in America I found it a hard struggle to learn to love the flag I had fought against so long. In foreign lands, under a foreign flag, I know I shall learn to love it as I used to do before the war. You all at the North don't understand us yet. You think we ought to love what we hated, and hate what we loved. It's not human nature. But I tell you what is human nature, Grey."

"And what is that?"

Peyton pointed to the young people making love at opposite sides of the deck.

"That," he said emphatically. "Love laughs at prejudices. See, I've tried for years to make Ned and Clara hate the Yankees. Yet my girl falls headlong in love with the first Yankee she meets, and Ned is ready to worship a Northern girl. Give us time, Grey. It took four years to make a deep wound. Twenty years is not long to heal it. But healed it will be. Do you know why?"

"Why, then?"

Peyton pointed to the setting sun.

"Because the future of the world depends on the healing of America's great wounds."

THE END.

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